University of Alberta

AN INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY INTO THREE ALBERTA MIDDLE SCHOOLS

by

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Dedication

This is dedicated to all educators

in both middle and junior high schools

who are striving to provide a more developmentally responsive education

to adolescents.

ABSTRACT

This study is an inquiry using ethnographic research methods into the interpretation of the middle school concept in three selected middle schools in Alberta in order to ascertain the themes crucial to their success as middle schools. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with the principal and another teaching staff member, informal interviews, observation notes, and pertinent school literature. Once analyzed, the set of data from each school formed the basis of three school descriptions, or portraits.

Although each school portrait was unique, several themes emerged which were shared by all three schools and which have been key factors in their success as middle schools. The themes also reveal the challenges and issues associated with adopting the middle school concept. The predominant theme among the three schools is that they continuously strive to be "developmentally responsive:" to meet the unique and transitional needs of adolescents. This is accomplished through the creation of small, personal communities for learning that connect teachers and support staff with each other, with students, and with parents. In addition, the schools have established a model of shared decision-making. Each school has also created and maintained an atmosphere of professional growth and learning as it continually strives to be responsive to its students and its community. Finally, the key ingredient to the success of all three school is a middle school staff that is dedicated to early adolescent education, that embraces growth and school improvement, and that believes in collaboration and cooperation.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Across the United States, since the early 1960s the middle school model has been steadily replacing the traditional junior high school model in an attempt to provide a more appropriate education for adolescents. According to the United States Department of Education's National Centre for Education Statistics, the junior high school will be extinct by the turn of the century as the number of middle schools in the country reaches 20,000.

Since its inception, the middle school movement has struggled to define and characterize the middle school. One of the most accepted and widely used middle school notions was articulated in 1984 by Joan Lipsitz, a recognized leader in middle level education. "Developmental responsiveness" refers to the alignment of educational practices with the needs of early adolescents. Since the early 1980s, middle school researchers and practitioners have conducted many research studies in an effort to explore this notion of "developmental responsiveness." As a result, several lists of middle school characteristics, essential features and the National Middle School Association's ten essential elements of the "true" middle level school, have been published as guidelines for today's middle school educators.

In a recent article entitled "Through the Looking Glass: The Future of Middle Level Education," Ronald D. Williamson and middle school leader J. Howard Johnston criticize these lists for their inflexibility. "These characteristics, while initially helpful in examining middle level practices, distracted educators from focusing on the needs of students in their own school. Educators became obsessed with finding the right program, the one correct curriculum, the appropriate team arrangement, and the correct block schedule" (1996, p. 1). In an effort to adhere to middle school doctrine, schools found themselves implementing programs and practices that were not always suited to the needs of their stakeholders. In essence, attempting to attach a definition to the term "middle school" is inappropriate because it does not consider the individualistic quality of each school.

The issue of defining "middle school" has not been the movement's only source of controversy. After more than three decades of reform and restructuring critics of the middle school still question whether middle schools truly are "developmentally responsive." Black (1995) pointed out that

> placing the word *middle* in a school's name is no assurance that the school is designed to work for kids. Some junior high schools are in tune with the middle school concept; some so-called middle schools still run traditional programs that resemble high schools for younger students. (p. 30)

Educators and the public in the United States have called into question whether being a middle school means that adolescents are indeed receiving an education that better meets their developmental needs.

The Alberta Middle School Movement

In Canada, the transformation from junior high school to middle school has been a recent event. Provinces such as Saskatchewan, and now Alberta are embracing middle school principles and practices in an effort to better meet the educational needs of adolescent from the ages of 10 to 14.

The middle school movement only began in the late 1980s, and was initiated in rural areas and bedroom communities of urban areas. Individual schools embraced the concept for various reasons. In some cases, changing demographics in communities led to the reconfiguring of grades. Middle school implementation was also the result of forward thinking school leaders and district superintendents who either envisioned a better way to educate students in the middle or sought to invoke drastic change in troubled junior high schools.

Rocky View School Division, a large district of schools surrounding Calgary to the west, north and east, led the provincial move to middle schooling in the early 1990s by transforming all of its junior high schools to middle schools and reconfiguring the grades at most of its schools to accommodate the new structure. Other districts have followed, although there still continue to be individual or small pockets of middle schools in districts where junior high schools dominate.

As the number of middle schools grew, the leaders of the province's pioneering schools sought to establish a provincial middle school association modelled after a similar organization in Saskatchewan. Deer Meadow Middle School staff and their principal, Dorothy Negropontes, were instrumental in the establishment of the Alberta Middle School Association.

Both interest in and implementation of the middle school concept has increased in ways that have legitimized the movement far beyond its quiet, rural beginnings. The association held its first conference in 1994 and since then membership in the Association and attendance and interest in the conference has increased exponentially. In fact, the Alberta Middle School Association is currently the fastest growing affiliate of the National Middle School Association. Universities in the province are also beginning to recognize the concept through the establishment of new programs. The University of Alberta's Faculty of Education has added a middle school minor to its traditional elementary and secondary routes for students pursuing a degree in teaching.

Because these changes have all occurred within a short period of about eight years, the middle school movement in Alberta can still be considered in its infancy stage. As a result, there is very little literature that addresses the middle school in the context of Alberta or even Canada. In fact, most new or established middle schools in the province refer to the American research and literature when developing middle school principles and practices. This gap in educational research, my own personal experiences and interest in middle schools, and the great enthusiasm and speed with which districts are embracing the middle school concept, led me to initiate a study into Alberta middle schools.

The Research Question

The purpose of this study is to explore the meanings of "middle school" in Alberta. Within this study, the following research questions were examined:

1. What definitions of "middle school" are in use in the schools in this study?
2. How are crucial aspects of this definition implemented in these middle schools?

3. What issues are associated with these middle schools both at their inception and as they evolve?

4. What themes associated with middle schools arise from the data?

Significance of the Study

Since the late 1980s several school districts in the province have transformed or are in the process of transforming their adolescent educational structures from junior high schools to middle schools. In addition, various schools within larger districts have embraced the middle school concept and publicly declared themselves "middle schools" next to neighbouring "junior high schools" which contain the same grade levels and which are in the same school district.

Although these schools all label themselves "middle schools," there is a lack of consistency with respect to the crucial aspects they embody, how these aspects are implemented and the issues associated with being a middle school. In addition, the label of "middle school" may not necessarily mean that the particular educational structures and practices are any different from those occurring in schools labelled, "junior high school." By seeking out definitions in use in middle schools, other schools who look to this particular concept of adolescent education for philosophical, demographic, or even fiscal reasons can use the experiences of the middle schools in this study as a learning tool for their own context.

Furthermore, although a substantial amount of research has been conducted in the field of middle level education, it has been mostly based on schools in the United States. This study will be significant in that it will begin to fill the research gap on middle schools in Alberta.

Method of the Study

This study is an interpretive inquiry into three Alberta middle schools using ethnographic methods of research. According to Borg and Gall (1989) "a major characteristic of qualitative research is its emphasis on 'grounded theory'" or theory that is "developed from the data" (p. 186). From these data, descriptions of the three middle schools emerged, providing the basis for definitions of middle schools in Alberta.

Selection of Schools

The three schools were selected from two lists of schools nominated by two leaders of established middle schools. I decided to include three schools in the study as a means of balancing two important considerations. Because of the expected in-depth nature of the data collection and the comprehensiveness of the resulting school descriptions, I felt that it would not be manageable to include more than three schools. Selecting fewer than three schools, however, would not provide a sufficient number of case studies to generate definitions and themes that could be transferable to other middle schools in the province.

To be nominated the schools must (a) have been publicly designated as a middle school, (b) be a member of the Middle School Association, © have been a middle school for at least three years, (d) have had the same principal for the last three years and (e) have a reputation as an exemplary middle school.

Once I received the two lists of schools, I chose the three schools that were common to both lists. The lists were identical, except for the inclusion of an additional school on one list that was not included on the other list. Once the three schools from these lists were chosen, consent for participation in the study was requested and procured from both the school district and the principal of the school. The school districts, and participants at each school within the district each received a letter outlining in detail the purpose and nature of the study, the time commitment involved in the study, provisions for exercising their right to opt out, and the procedures for ensuring anonymity, confidentiality, and avoiding threat or harm to the participants. Two copies of these letters are provided in Appendix A.

Data Collection

This study sought to explore the meanings of "middle school," their crucial aspects, how these are implemented and the issues associated with middle schools in a naturalistic setting. The researcher spent two days at each of the three schools engaged in data collection. The period of data collection at the three schools was spread over three months. This was sufficient except for one school, where unexpected circumstances on

the second day of the initial visit warranted an additional day of data collection one month later. First, the researcher collected and perused pertinent school documents to become initially acquainted with basic information about the school, its organizational structure, and its program. A thorough reading of the documents also gave the researcher direction for the proceeding structured and informal interviews. During the remainder of the school visits, the interviewer scheduled two formal interviews with the principal and a teacher whom the principal had selected based on their involvement in the development of the school. Informal interviews with teachers, support staff and parents occurred on a scheduled and impromptu basis. Finally, the researcher had opportunities to observe general school operations, school events, assemblies, and through invitation, classroom activities.

Field notes were taken during the visits based on the observations and informal interviews. An interview schedule for the formal interviews was developed to ensure comprehensiveness, but it was not strictly adhered to during the interviews (Appendix B).

Data Analysis

The data collection procedures resulted in three types of data: field notes from observations and informal interviews, school literature and formal interview transcripts. These documents were analysed using deductive coding. From the coded data, categories were formed which provided an organizational framework for the school descriptions. From these descriptions, a picture of each school emerged.

The researcher used an open coding method of data analysis, which involved highlighting words, phrases, sentences and groups of sentences that were deemed important to a comprehensive understanding of the school. After the data were open coded two or three times, the researcher made a category note beside each sentence or group of sentences of coded information. Once the categories had been combined and modified, the researcher used a selective coding process to locate additional information for each category. The coded data were then reorganized into categories and written into categorized notes. These categorized notes were then written into text: the school descriptions. The generated categories differ among the three schools because of the

uniqueness of each school's organizational structure and programming. As much as possible, original school terms were used as section headings in order to capture the spirit and language of each school. The descriptions were then compared to reveal themes common to all three schools.

Trustworthiness

Several steps were taken to improve the trustworthiness of the data obtained from the respondents. First, the schools chosen were credible choices to others involved in middle school education. The schools had to meet the criteria I established and had to be nominated by two middle school educators who have been principals of two "pioneer" schools and have held or presently hold executive positions on the Alberta Middle School Association.

The data had to be dependable. After the data were collected, the descriptions were read and reviewed by my advisor. The descriptions of the schools were also sent for review to the principal of each school in order that corrections or deletions be made as necessary. These reviews helped to ensure that the data collected and the descriptions written were dependable and accurate.

Finally, the data had to be transferable. The detailed descriptions of each school were grounded in the collected data: field notes, school literature and interview transcripts. For this reason, they will be rich and comprehensive to readers. It is expected that the descriptions and emerging themes will have considerable value for others who are involved in middle schools in the province, as they may transfer those aspects of the descriptions which they find to be both applicable and helpful in their own emerging, evolving or established middle school.

Ethics

All steps were taken to observe the University of Alberta's ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. The researcher obtained informed consent from its participants and allowed them the opportunity to opt out of the study at any time. Steps were taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality and to avoid threat or harm to the participants or other individuals.

Initially, the district and the principal were asked for their consent to participate in the study. Once this was obtained, a letter was sent to both the district and the principal outlining in detail the purpose and nature of the research. Formal interview subjects, the principal and other staff member, were given another letter which sought their written consent. In order to seek involvement of other staff members for informal interviews, letters were sent to the principal of each school, who discussed the study with and disseminated the letters to all staff members at the staff meeting. These letters provided information about the study, a section requesting consent, and a clause which would allow participants to opt out of the study at any time.

In addition to the letter, provisions were made for participants to obtain further information about the study from the researcher, through phone or e-mail. During my visits to the schools, all participants were encouraged to ask further questions regarding the purpose and nature of the research if so desired.

All participants and school names have been changed to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. A description of the school was sent to a representative of each school to delete or change any portions which they did not wish to be included in the final thesis document. Field notes, transcripts and tapes were kept in a locked file cabinet when not used by the researcher during the writing of the thesis. After the thesis has been completed and successfully defended, the field notes, transcripts and tape will be destroyed.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON MIDDLE SCHOOLS

According to Klingele (1979), the early development of the middle school and its predecessor the junior high school, has been characterized by struggle, debate, controversy and much scrutiny. Vassalo (1990) describes middle schools as "suffering from an identity crisis" and a "twenty year experiment that has been shrouded in debate" (p. 26). Educators and researchers in the United States have struggled to define the middle school concept and its crucial aspects. Other writers question the efficacy of the middle school concept and the misalignment between middle school philosophy and actual practice.

I have begun with an historical review of adolescent education to aid in an understanding of the present day issues that face the middle school movement. I then examine theories of adolescent development, since they have served as the basis for middle school philosophy and conclude with the major reforms and developments with respect to the attempt to define middle school philosophy and essential characteristics.

The History of the Middle School

From junior high school to middle school, educators have struggled to provide an appropriate education for adolescents. As such, adolescent education has undergone considerable change since the first junior high schools.

The Junior High School

The origin of the junior high school can be traced to the 1909-1910 school year in the states of Ohio and California. The opening of the junior high school was a result of public criticism of the prevailing system of educating adolescents.

The focus of these new schools ranged considerably from occupation training to college preparation. Clark and Clark (1993) describe the junior high school as an idea "for early adolescents which was based primarily on concerns about perceived failures of the organization of elementary and secondary schools into eight and four grades respectively" (p. 448). Hansen and Hern (1971) suggest that "the history of the first middle school, the junior high, indicates that it was conceived not as a movement to introduce something new

into American education but as an expedient endeavour to ease the supposed deficiencies" (p. 4).

During the next forty years, the junior high school expanded rapidly, and reformers sought to further improve this new institution. Although educators experimented with curricula and scheduling in an attempt to better meet the needs of the adolescent, the search for the best middle level education proved to be an elusive task. By the 1950s, leading middle school educators such as William Alexander, Emmett Williams, and Donald Eichorn advocated a restructuring of the junior high school (Clark & Clark, 1993).

The Emergent Middle School

Alexander and George (1993) describe this growing dissatisfaction among educators by detailing a monograph prepared by the Department of Supervision and Curriculum Development of the Florida Education Association (ACSD, 1954). It states:

> The prevailing type of junior high program organization is a departmentalized one. . . .This type of organization provides too abrupt a change from the self-contained classroom of the elementary school, too little relationships between the subjects and the interests and needs of young adolescents, and too little time for any teacher to carry out the varied type of program needed by young adolescents. (p. 47)

Mills (1961) is also cited by Alexander and George (1993) as criticizing the junior high school mode. "For some time the junior high school concept has been under scrutiny. . . . In practice it has resulted in junior high schools becoming miniature senior high schools, with social activities, athletic programs, and the instructional programs of the senior high school moving into the lower educational levels" (p. 27).

As a response to this discontent, a new concept for educating adolescents began to develop and was implemented in several school districts during the early 1960's. One of the most influential reformers, William Alexander, presented this concept in 1963 at the Junior High conference at Cornell University. He recommended that grades 5-8 or grades 6-8 would be the best grade configuration and that the new schools would better meet the following educational goals:

1. a well articulated 12- to 14-year system of education;

2. preparation for, even transition to, adolescence;
3. continued general education; and
4. abundant opportunities for exploration of individualization, interests, a flexible curriculum, and emphasis on values. (George and Alexander, 1993, pp. 27-28)

During the next 25 years, this new school unit, increasingly called the "middle school," became widespread throughout the country, although the reasons for their emergence varied and were not always consistent with the original intents of the reformers. In the Southern United States, racial desegregation produced new schools with new grade configurations. In the early 1960s, certain school districts in the Southern United States justified these new schools with "the importance of taking pupils out of the neighbourhood ghetto and getting them into a large integrated school at a younger grade" (Clark & Clark, 1993, p. 450). Another middle school recommendation made during the early 1960s was that "The ninth grade should be moved to the high school in order to offer all college preparatory courses in one setting" (Clark & Clark, 1993, p. 450).

Other reasons for moving students into new grade configurations included the need to add another grade to declining enrollment in high schools, overcrowding of elementary schools, the desire to balance racial compositions, and the motivation of districts to receive new middle school funding from the state government.

Despite the less lofty motivations for considering the new grade configurations, George and Alexander believe that ultimately these new schools produced

> the sort of outcomes which pleased parents, policy-makers, and practitioners alike. Student behaviour and attitudes improved, home-school relationships became closer, inter-ethnic interaction became more positive, students enjoyed school more, teachers grew increasingly more appreciative of the opportunity to work together, and in many situations academic achievement held steady or improved slightly while these other more positive outcomes became pleasantly obvious.
>
> (George and Alexander, 1993, p. 31)

By the 1980s, the middle school concept had become a popular alternative to the junior high school. Rather than existing as only a junior version of the high school, the middle school was designed expressly to provide a transitional and appropriate education for students in the middle years. "The middle school exists in its own right, free from the

image of the high school and free to serve the educational needs, characteristics and capabilities of early adolescents, who are neither elementary nor secondary by nature" (Alexander and George, 1993, p. 23).

Theories of Adolescent Development

Complementary to the middle school movement was a renewed focus in research on adolescent development. This research was of fundamental importance in developing an educational system which was geared to the specific needs of adolescents.

A Unique Developmental Stage

All adolescent development theorists agree that adolescence is a specific developmental stage in a person's life in which major physical, cognitive and psycho-social changes occur. Shave and Shave (1989) describe adolescence as a "distinct developmental phase that is quantifiably different from earlier and later phases" (p. 25). Eichorn (1984) further differentiates middle school students by labelling them "transescents": students in grades six, seven and eight in transition from childhood to adolescence.

Braddock, Shu-Chang, and McPartland (1988) also emphasize that students in the ages covered by middle grades encompass distinctive biological, cognitive, and social dimensions in human growth toward adulthood. Although there is a general pattern to these changes, adolescents do not adhere to the same rate of development for each change. As a result, middle school students tend to be a more varied, diverse group than any other school population. However, each student is dealing with some major change during most of their middle school years (Braddock, Shu-Chang, and McPartland, 1988).

Characteristics of Transescents and Adolescents

Although transescents and adolescents are a considerably diverse group, adolescent development theorists identify needs and characteristics which are common among all members of the group.

Feldman and Elliott (1990) describe adolescents as "changing physically, maturing sexually, becoming increasingly able to engage in complex reasoning and markedly expanding their knowledge of themselves and the world about them" (p. 4). These and

many other factors urge them to gain more control over how and with whom they spend their time.

Manning (1995) describes the following three themes in the adolescent stage of development: changes, constants and concerns. Middle schoolers have developing bodies, expanding social worlds and advancing cognitive abilities. Constants in their lives include the need for love and security, acceptance and an optimistic perspective on life. Finally, adolescents express concerns about the developmental changes, the individual differences in the rates of change, friends, cliques, peer pressure and changing family relationships. These feelings about the changes, constants and concerns may lead to feelings of unworthiness, inadequacy and low self-esteem.

Thornburg (1980) identifies the following seven major characteristics of the adolescent group:

1. Becoming aware of increased physical changes;
2. Organizing knowledge and concepts into problem-solving strategies;
3. Learning new social/sex roles;
4. Recognizing one's identification with a stereotype;
5. Developing friendship with others;
6. Gaining a sense of independence;
7. Developing a sense of morality and values. (p. 5)

The work of John Hill (1980) provides a holistic framework for understanding the period of adolescence. Three factors interact in adolescence. The first factor involves the primary biological, psychological and social changes that occur in early adolescence. Although there is a general pattern to these changes, adolescents do not adhere to the same rate of development for each change. He also believes that there are six secondary issues that arise from the primary changes. Attachment, autonomy, sexuality, intimacy, achievement, and identity are psychological issues that adolescents deal with during the primary changes. Thirdly, the primary changes and psychological issues interact with the adolescent's environment: the family, peer group and school.

Changes and Needs during Adolescence

Many of the middle school scholars make adolescent development theory more meaningful by linking it with educational practice. These implications and educational needs provide the basis for identifying appropriate middle school education programs.

Dorman's Educational Needs. Based on adolescent development research, Dorman (1984) identifies seven educational needs of young adolescents that have implications for middle school educators. These include the need for (a) diversity, (b) self-exploration and self-definition, (c) meaningful participation in school and community, (d) positive social interaction with peers and adults, (e) physical activity, (f) competence and achievement, and (g) structure and clear limits.

Biological Changes. Biological changes, the advance of puberty, increase in body size, and skeletal structural changes are evidence of the beginning of adolescence. Although the developmental sequence is the same for all, the age of pubertal changes and rates of growth vary (Eichorn, 1984). Adolescents may feel more adult-like in appearance and worthy of adult roles and responsibilities despite cognitive or psycho-social characteristics that are more child-like. Biological changes also give rise to physical sensations which translate to emotions and are expressed in social behaviour (Manning, 1995). Finally, these physical changes that occur during adolescence have considerable impact on the psycho-social domain.

Implications for Educational Practice. Based on the biological changes that middle schoolers undergo, Manning (1995) recommended that schools embrace the following educational practices:

1. Adapt to constantly changing physical needs of 10-14 year-olds.
2. Emphasize self-understanding and self-acceptance about physical changes.
3. Emphasize hands-on activities and experiences.
4. Stress physical activities designed to meet individual differences.
5. Emphasize intramural programs and de-emphasize intense competitive interscholastic sports.
6. Provide developmentally appropriate sex education.

7. Provide health programs that stress physical development, nutrition, proper exercise and personal hygiene.

Psycho-Social Changes. Erikson's psycho-social theory identified eight stages through which humans develop. Young adolescents are just entering the Identity vs. Role Confusion stage (Erikson, 1963). At this stage there is an increased preoccupation with the "self" and the development of an individual identity. They are constantly defining and testing their views of themselves, their worth as a person, and building self-confidence to assume different responsibilities and challenges (Eichorn, 1984). Adolescents frequently examine and compare their physical and social characteristics with others of similar age and levels of development. Manning (1995) emphasized the increased importance of social interaction at this age level. Adolescents shift their allegiance away from teachers and parents; the peer group becomes the prime source for standards and models of behavior. They seek more freedom and independence from adult authorities, and in this search may rebuke authority and engage in anti-social behaviours. This struggle to develop an identity amidst the influences of family, peers and school can cause great instability and insecurity for the adolescents.

Implications of Psycho-Social Changes. These changes have several considerations for middle school education. Manning (1995) believed that educators need to help middle school students through these changes by:

1. Helping students win recognition for skills, ability and accomplishments.
2. Helping students to identify positively with peers and the need to benefit from positive peer pressure.
3. Provide appropriate opportunities for friendship and social interaction.
4. Help students develop same-sex friendships and success in cross-sex interactions.
5. Help students understand how their behaviour affects others.
6. Help students become increasingly independent and responsible for their behaviour in the home, school, and community.
7. Help students understand the positive aspects of their developing self.

8. Teach social skills
9. Help students develop values and a sense of morality.
10. Help students develop a positive attitude toward varying social groups.
11. Understand the changing allegiance from parents and teachers.

Cognitive Changes. The middle school years also mark a period of cognitive developments as transescents progress from Piaget's concrete operations stage to the formal operations stage. "Young adolescents master logical operations using material with concrete content and things in concrete terms about a problem" (Manning, 1995, p. 26). When young adolescents start functioning in the formal operations stage, they are able to better comprehend abstract concepts, to develop and test hypotheses, to communicate more effectively, to analyse and synthesize data, and to apply different strategies and solutions to problems. The formal operations stage also allows young adolescents to make reasoned moral and ethical choices. However, it is important not to assume that adolescents reach this stage at the same age. In addition, there is diversity within the cognitive development of each individual; abstract thinking and reflection can occur in one area and remain in concrete terms in another area (Manning, 1995).

Implications of Cognitive Changes. Eichorn (1984) and Manning (1995) outlined the following considerations when developing curriculum and instructional practices that are appropriate for students during this period of change:

1. Adolescents in transition to the formal operation stage need opportunities to reason logically about verbal statements in absence of particular objects.
2. Provide educational experiences that allow learners to engage in higher levels of cognitive thought and activity.
3. Plan and implement instruction based on student differences in ability.
4. Adapt to changing interests and limited attention spans of students.
5. Stress individualized, cognitively appropriate materials and activities.
6. Emphasize development of problem-solving skills and reflective thinking processes.
7. Enable students to explore interests and talents and learn how to study.

8. Emphasize holistic rather than isolated skills when teaching communications.

9. Focus on mastery of essential processes rather than just information acquisition.

10. Provide exploratory hands-on experiences to foster creativity and stimulate interest.

The research on adolescent development recognizes that adolescence is a unique developmental stage with specific characteristics. Consequently, middle schools have much to consider when creating an appropriate educational environment for students in the transescent and adolescent years. Alexander and George (1993) point out that "the point of greatest significance is that the middle school must be uniquely planned, staffed, and operated to provide a program that is truly focused on the rapidly moving and changing learners in transition from childhood to adolescence" (p. 31).

Defining the Middle School Concept

During the late 1970s and early 1980's, the body of middle school literature expanded. In recounting this period of the middle school movement, Clark and Clark (1993) state that "while developmental psychologists were making important contributions to the understanding of early adolescent development, scholars and researchers were seeking new ways to define purposes and practices of middle schools" (p. 454). The need to define the middle school became paramount to middle level educators. The number of middle schools across the country had grown dramatically, but agreement in "what middle schools should be like" was lacking (Alexander and George, 1993, p. 38). Brook and Edwards expressed this need for a clearly defined identity:

> As with adolescent youth, the middle school movement must struggle to find an identity that differentiated it from other movements and provides it with high visibility and priority in the educational and public communities as well. The need for the middle school must be communicated with clarity and persuasiveness, and the uniqueness of the middle school response to that need must be made with logic and intensity. (1978, p. 16)

Characteristics of Middle Schools

In response to the need for a middle level comprehensive focus, both scholars and

educational organizations began to publish descriptions and lists of "middle school desirable characteristics." Each list varied slightly in their inclusion of characteristics, although the theme of meeting the students' developmental needs was central to all.

Based on her research of four successful middle schools, Joan Lipsitz introduced the term "developmental responsiveness," meaning "schools and programs that were aligned with the needs of their early adolescent students" (Clark and Clark, 1993, p. 454). She also identified the following characteristics of successful middle schools:

> schools responsive to early adolescent development will reduce the size of the focus (interdisciplinary teams, schools-within-schools, house plans, teacher advisory groups), personalize the quality of adult-student relationships, give ample room for peer groups to flourish, acknowledge diverse areas of competence, involve students in participatory activities, emphasize self-exploration and physical activity, and encompass all these in a clearly defined, structured environment. (p. 199)

In its publication, This We Believe, the National Middle School Association presented two essential elements for schools that wish to be responsive to the nature and needs of young adolescents. These characteristics are based on the belief that the middle school is an "educational response to the needs and characteristics of youngsters during early adolescence, and as such, deals with the full range of intellectual and developmental needs" (NMSA, 1982, p. 14). Irvin, Valentine, and Clark (1994) state that This We Believe "has become a benchmark against which middle level educators can measure schools" (p. 54). The ten elements provided guidelines for new and established middle schools and prompted other scholars to examine the characteristics in more depth. They are as follows:

1. Educators knowledgeable about and committed to young adolescents.
2. Balanced curriculum based on the needs of young adolescents.
3. A range of organizational arrangements.
4. Varied instructional strategies.
5. A full exploratory program.
6. Comprehensive advising and counselling.
7. Continuous progress for students.
8. Evaluation procedures compatible with the nature of adolescents.
9. Cooperative planning.
10. A positive school climate. (NMSA, 1982, pp. 15-22)

Alexander and McEwin (1989) also include interdisciplinary organization, flexible scheduling and continued orientation and articulation for students, parents, and teachers in their list of middle school "earmarks" (Alexander and George, 1993, p. 40). Beane's (1987) list of recommended middle school characteristics is also a response to practices that are not developmentally responsive. He viewed them as guidelines for middle school policy. They are as follows:

1. General education, rather than narrow specialization
2. Exciting and engaging activities, not passive assimilation of information
3. Exploration of ideas, not regurgitation of trivialities
4. Learning to cooperate with others, not compete against them
5. Trying out self-identifies, not forced to conform
6. Actively exploring values and alternative beliefs
7. Finding unity and wholeness not reduction and fragmentation
8. Beginning independence and making mistakes not sudden induction into adulthood.
9. Understanding issues of early adolescence, not simply preparing them for adolescence and adulthood. (p. 86)

Finally, Alexander and George (1993) provide a definition of a middle school and describe their choices of characteristics of good middle schools, also outlined in earlier editions of The Exemplary Middle School. According to them, a middle school is a "school of some three to five years between the elementary and high school focused on the educational needs of students in these in-between years and designed to promote continuous educational progress for all concerned" (p. 44). Their exemplary middle school characteristics are reflective of two important terms: unique and transitional. They include the following:

1. A middle school philosophy based on the characteristics and needs of developing adolescents.
2. An interdisciplinary team organization where teachers share students, space, and schedules.
3. Flexible (perhaps block) scheduling within the classroom and across the school.
4. A building and facilities designed especially for the middle school program.
5. Flexible grouping strategies, primarily heterogeneous, within the classroom and across the school.
6. Active instruction based on the learning styles of developing adolescents.
7. A curriculum characterized by both a core academic focus and a broad range of

exploratory opportunities.

8. A smooth and continuous program of staff development, renewal, and school improvement focused on the unique concerns of middle school education.
9. A smooth and continuous transition between the elementary and the high school program permitting uniqueness at the middle level.
10. A shared decision making model which is formal, regular, and systematic, providing authentic collaboration between and among teachers, administrators, parents and students.
11. An extracurricular program based on the needs of the early adolescents, providing regular success experiences for all students.
12. Teachers and administrators trained and selected especially for educating the the development of adolescents.
13. Organizational arrangements which encourage long-term teacher-student relationships such as multi-age grouping, school-within-school, team or house organizations.
14. A teacher-based guidance/home room school.
15. A school program focused on three overall goals: academic learning, personal development, and group citizenship.

It would seem that by the later half of the 1980s there was finally consensus among educators and scholars as to the definition and desirable characteristics of a middle school. However, the discussion about what constitutes an exemplary or effective middle school was far from over.

Middle School Reform

Since the establishment of the National Middle School Association's definition of the middle school and the numerous ensuing definitions and lists of characteristics, the institution has come under much scrutiny by educational scholars and practitioners. Both critics and supporters agree on the merit of a specialized education for adolescents and the rationale that drives middle schools.

In "Muddle in the Middle", Vassalo (1990) states that "In theory, middle schools offer students a transition from the nurturing elementary schools to the impersonal high school" (p. 26). Klingele (1985) supported the middle school concept by recognizing that "The rationale of middle schools is based on relatively simple ideas. Namely, middle school youngsters are just as unique a group as elementary and high school students. They are, therefore, equally deserving of a unique system of education" (p. 335). Alexander and

McEwin (1986) provided strong support for middle level education when they state that, "There is a growing cadre of professional and lay-persons who now recognize the appropriateness of a middle level concept and who are promoting its growth. This effort has remained strong despite many possible diversions, such as the 'back to basics' movement, low budgets, and general public dissatisfaction with public education" (p. 91).

However, many scholars and educators are concerned with the consistency of research findings which point to a gap between the middle school philosophy and practices espoused by middle school leaders and the NMSA and actual middle school practices. Black (1995) relates the reality of many middle school practices:

> Indeed, far too many so-called "middle schools" still put kids in tradition-bound classrooms, where teachers lecture and kids listen. And, in opposition to what research says should be in place, these schools often have what one middle school assistant principal calls the "killer": heavy use of textbooks; a six period day with classes changing every 50 minutes or so; teachers organized by departments and teaching by subjects; counsellors who see students by appointment (usually to handle a crisis); interscholastic athletics and other competitive activities; principals and assistant principals who emphasize discipline and rules; and an emphasis on academic learning over enrichment and elective courses. (p. 30)

White (1993) described the National Middle School Association characteristics with a disturbing note that "these innovative ideas have failed to become widely adopted" (p. 8). Klingele (1985) maintained that middle level students are "the recipients of a hand-me-down education often in the forms of instruction, curriculum, materials, teachers, facilities, and importance within the public education system." Vassalo (1990) argued that "in reality, middle schools follow the junior high school approach in that they are more like secondary schools than elementary schools" (p. 26).

These critics, however, do not propose that the middle schools return to the junior high concept, but rather advocate that sweeping reform is required in order to return actual middle school practices to the original middle school vision. Perhaps the most important and influential study to address the need for middle school reform has been Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century, a report of the Carnegie Council

on Adolescent Development that came out in 1989. Quattrone (1990) described the problems outlined in the report and the "sweeping transformation" that is required to address these problems. He outlined the eight goals of the report as follows:

1. Create small communities for learning.
2. Teach a core academic program.
3. Ensure success for all students.
4. Empower teachers and administrators.
5. Staff middle school grade schools with specially prepared teachers.
6. Improve academic performance through health and fitness.
7. Reengage families in education.
8. Connect schools with communities.

The report targets two institutions: (a) junior high schools that have not addressed developmentally appropriate practices, and (b) middle schools that have addressed these practices somewhat but have "blurred or weakened their intellectual mission" (Quattrone, 1990, p. 54).

The 1990s: Redefining the Middle School

The "Turning Points" document was the impetus for a nation-wide examination of middle schools. Numerous state governments took a hard look at what was going on in their middle schools and published reports. This process brought about a refocusing on the important role of the middle school in today's society and new characteristics that spoke more to general educational themes than specific directions. Much literature continues to focus on what middle schools must do in order to be true to the notion of "developmental responsiveness" in the context of a changing world.

Middle Schools Need Real Reform

Clark and Clark (1992) emphasized the need for developmentally responsive middle schools in an increasingly demanding society. Middle schools must prepare students for lifelong learning, teaching them to be their own teachers. They also stressed that adolescence is a crucial period in an individual's life. It is a time where students either acquire learning skills and positive, socially acceptable behaviour or acquire transitory, futile skills and learn negative, socially unacceptable behaviour. Negative

learning experiences during adolescence can lead to failure, frustration and eventually dropout. Middle schools play a crucial role in providing positive influences during this time.

Further to this need Clark and Clark (1993) have outlined four suggestions for making schools more "developmentally responsive." They believe that middle level educators must develop their knowledge base about "what it means to be developmentally responsive and how responsiveness reflects on their conception of learners, of the learning process, of knowledge and their conception of the aims of education" (p. 456). Educators must also ensure that their programs are effective with respect to organizational structures. They must be aligned with adolescent development and must "have a passion for what can be done to enrich the lives of their students" (p. 457). Finally, Clark and Clark (1993) believe that current middle schools must be directly involved in the entire educational reform movement that is moving through the country.

John Lounsbury, middle school pioneer, criticized the education profession, calling it "ill-informed" and "narrow" in its concept of education. He noted that many middle school teachers consider middle school as mere preparation for high school and are driven by the pressure to cover content. He believes that what is "handicapping to the development of effective middle level schools are that most continue to view the middle school as a collection of separate components" (Lounsbury, 1991. p. 8). These parts are not always in harmony, and sometimes they are even in opposition to each other. Middle school reform must refocus on the nature and needs of early adolescents, the principles of learning and the needs of a democratic society.

The reformers of the '90s recognize that middle schooling plays a crucial role in the educational experience of a child. For middle schools to truly be "developmentally responsive," they must reexamine the initial purpose of middle level education: to meet the needs of early adolescent learners.

Middle Schools in the 90s: Themes

More recent writings on middle school education have turned away from dictating specific practices or programs. Williamson and Johnston (1996) believed that lists of

essential features and characteristics distracted middle school educators from focusing on the needs of their own school: "responsible middle level schools embrace a range of organizational and learning models, monitor and adjust their programs and are comfortable challenging the orthodoxies of the middle level movement" (p. 2). Like Lounsbury, and Clark and Clark, they propose a more holistic, thematic view of middle level education. The new "lists" consider the middle level learner while allowing schools considerable space for interpretation within their own context.

The middle school research conducted in Wisconsin by Peppard and Rottier in 1990 resulted in a set of general principles that effective middle schools embody, but did not dictate the manner in which these principles should be carried out in schools:

1. Schools should be a place where close, trusting relationships with adults and peers create a climate for personal growth and intellectual development.
2. Every student in the middle grades should learn to think critically through mastery of an appropriate body of knowledge, lead a healthy life, behave ethically and lawfully, and responsibilities of citizenship in a pluralistic society.
3. All young adolescents should have the opportunity to succeed in every aspect of the middle grade program regardless of previous achievement or the pace at which they learn.
4. Decisions concerning the experiences of middle grade students should be made by the adults who know them best.
5. Teachers in middle grade schools should be selected and specially educated to teach young adolescents.
6. Young adolescents must be healthy in order to learn.
7. Families and middle grade schools must be allied through trust and respect if young adolescents are to succeed.
8. Schools and community organizations should share responsibility for each middle grade student's success.
9. Mission statement philosophy and goals must reflect needs and characteristics of young adolescents as well as a commitment to meet those needs.

The NASSP's Council on Middle Level Education (1993) examined middle school educational functions using a thematic approach. They believe that these themes should be developed in a responsive middle school:

1. Exploration: An exploratory curriculum allows students to explore their needs, interests, talents and skills through both academic and recreational school activities.

2. Socialization: Students must be given adequate opportunities for social interaction with peers and adults.
3. Differentiation: Schools should respond to a wide range of adolescent development stages and learning styles through a curriculum that allows for alternative learning arrangements, teaching strategies, materials, and times and approaches to classroom management.
4. Integration: An integrated curriculum helps students transfer skills and knowledge across disciplines in a meaningful way.
5. Articulation: Cooperation with elementary schools and receiving high schools helps minimize the gaps in between the program levels and ensures a smooth transition of program and learning expectations.
6. Guidance and Advisement: a strong guidance and advisor-advisee program helps students through the changes that occur during the middle years.

In "Through the Looking Glass: The Future of Middle Level Education" (1996), Williamson and Johnston propose six themes that serve as the basis for viewing middle level education. Their themes take traditional "defining characteristics of the middle level school" and translate them to "provide a fresh perspective on the middle level movement" (p. 1). In doing so, they address several issues that middle schools have been facing in the quest for a middle level education that is responsive to the needs of students, teachers and communities.

From Interdisciplinary Team to Learning Communities. Williamson and Johnston (1996) claimed that implementing an interdisciplinary team does not necessarily ensure that groups of students and teachers will work collaboratively to address curriculum and instruction programs. "Responsive middle level schools focus their energy and resources on developing effective learning communities" (Williamson and Johnston, 1996, p. 2). In learning communities, adults and students are committed to meaningful collaborative work to create a personalized school environment. This environment strengthens students' commitment to school and engagement in learning.

From Advisor-Advisee Programs to Restructured Adult-Student Relationships. In theory, the decentralized advisory program would give students access to an adult advocate who would offer guidance and address adolescent concerns to small groups of students. In practice, "while many schools have fulfilled the intent of the program, in other schools it

was poorly executed and poorly received" (Williamson and Johnston, 1996, p. 2). Teachers and parents are not always comfortable with the "hot topics" discussed in advisory programs. To avoid this problem, many programs become sanitized programs with little importance or meaning.

Williamson and Johnston (1996) advocated a less deliberate, scheduled advising; schools need to ensure that real adult-child relationships can be formed through the provision of time for students and teachers to interact in purposeful, enjoyable activities. More importantly, they emphasize that "if we are successful in creating learning communities, we probably do not need a formal advisory program" (p. 3).

From Block Schedules to Using Time as a Resource. Williamson and Johnston (1996) related that many middle level schools have struggled to develop the perfect schedule. Often, schools would adopt the scheduling ideas of other schools, or would supply interdisciplinary teams with large blocks of time, which would then be used in the same manner that traditional class periods functioned. "Responsive schools see time as a resource, rather than a constraint" (Williamson and Johnston, 1996, p. 4). Most schools that use time effectively have worked hard to refine, alter, and change their scheduling practices continuously in order to meet student needs.

From Interdisciplinary Units to Rigorous and Authentic Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. Interdisciplinary units have been advocated in much middle school rhetoric and go hand in hand with the interdisciplinary team. The results have often been curriculum integration that is forced, unnatural, and without any relationship to instructional goals: the teaching of important content and skills. According to Williamson and Johnston (1996), authentic learning incorporates the following elements:

1. Understanding that all children can learn and contribute to the intellectual community.
2. Accepting that children learn at different rates and come from different interests and backgrounds.
3. Providing a curriculum for all students, without exception, that consists of scientific thought, quantitative reasoning, the arts, a second language, western and non-western culture, thoughtful reading and competent expression.

> 4. Using instructional processes that require students to analyse, synthesize, and evaluate information, demonstrate learning through projects and products, minimize permanent group assignments, and infuse technology to create and use information.
>
> (p. 5)

Williamson and Johnston (1996) recommended authentic curriculum and instruction: meaningful, purposeful, and useful learning experiences that balance project-based learning with formal instruction.

From Parent Participation to Parents as Active Partners. Schools today tend to expect that parent participation in and support of the school will occur with the same ease and enthusiasm as it did thirty years ago. However, the changes in family patterns and demographics have altered the family-home relationship considerably (Williamson and Johnston, 1996). To be successful, schools engage parents as partners, working together to achieve a common goal. The role of schools is to support parents in helping their children: providing them with strategies and information about parenting, helping them monitor their child's learning, and referring them to appropriate agencies during crises. Parents will be invited to participate in the site-based governance of the school. The school must also build relationships with the larger community: citizens, organizations, business and child-related agencies. "Real partnerships must be based on mutual understanding, respect, support, compassion, and an unquestioned commitment to the welfare of each child in the school" (Williamson and Johnston, 1996, p. 6).

From Testing to Accountability and Program Evaluation. In response to the increased demands for accountability to the public, schools increased standardized testing and grade requirements. These tests, considered inappropriate and inaccurated, were viewed negatively by teachers (Williamson and Johnston, 1996). Although the evidence is limited, there are data to "show that implementation of some specific middle level practices creates a climate in which teachers feel more empowered and efficacious" and show that "students in middle level schools with less departmentalization, more heterogenous grouping, more team teaching, and other factors had higher achievement scores and were more engaged in their schooling than students in schools without these

characteristics" (Williamson and Johnston, p. 7). Middle schools must be accountable, but measure their success through a variety of measures such as average daily attendance, teachers absences, grade distribution, achievement tests, discipline referrals, surveys, parent participation in conferences, staff development participation, and student participation in co-curricular activities. Accountable schools do gather and analyse data as part of the commitment to program improvement. As Williamson and Johnston aptly state, "It is eager to examine successes as well as failures" (p. 7).

Summary of Middle School Reform

The new middle school reformers suggest that schools need to refocus on their purpose: to provide educational experiences reflective of the unique and transitional needs of early adolescents. Rather than attempting to adhere to a strict list of specific characteristics, the literature suggests that schools incorporate middle school themes into school programs and practices in ways that will be responsive to the students and community. This "wholesale" change provides a more meaningful, effective means of restructuring middle schools than adding or removing specific programs or practices (Lounsbury, 1995).

Summary and Critique of the Literature on Middle Schools

The inception of the middle school can be traced back to dissatisfaction with the junior high school in the United States. Scholars and educators called for a new school structure whose sole purpose was to meet the unique and transitional needs of early adolescents. Research in adolescent development theory was to be the basis for the philosophy and practices of these new schools, a linkage that was referred to as "developmental responsiveness." Once established across the country, many scholars and educational organizations worked to define the middle school and establish lists of essential characteristics. The National Middle School Association's definition and middle school characteristics became widely accepted and implemented in schools during the latter half of the 1980s.

At the same time, certain leaders in the middle school movement questioned whether schools for adolescents had become more "developmentally responsive" in

reality. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Education's document, Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century, prompted a deeper examination into what constitutes an appropriate middle level education. More recent reformers have suggested that middle schools be restructured to incorporate important middle level principles or themes, rather than to adhere to strict lists of essential characteristics. Theses writers also strongly recommend that middle schools refocus on their initial purpose: to meet the developmental needs of early adolescents.

Despite the small and more recent body of literature which provides a more holistic and thematic view of middle schools, the vast majority of middle school literature represents the ongoing struggle to define "middle school": to present a blueprint of what middle schools should look like. Although there are some commonalities among the various published lists of middle school characteristics, there is also considerable variation. Some of the literature, including the well-respected and widely-used Exemplary Middle School, both outlines its recommended middle school characteristics and then provides detailed, even prescriptive practices relating to each characteristic. There is an assumption within literature that implementation of one of these accepted lists of characteristics, such as those provided by the National Middle School Association or leading middle school writers, will result in a successful or even exemplary middle school. What has not been considered in these publications is that every middle school in the United States or Canada must interpret the middle school concept in a way that best suits the needs of its students and parent community. Each middle school staff is a collection of individuals with different talents, teaching styles and beliefs about education. Each middle school also has a different focus with respect to curricular or extra-curricular programming. Defining "middle school" is an elusive task because every school for adolescents translates "middle school" in a unique way.

The recommendations outlined in Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century, and the writings of John Lounsbury, J. Howard Johnston, and Ronald Williamson are a refreshing contrast to prescriptive middle school ideals. There is considerable room for interpretation in both the Carnegie Council's eight

recommendations and Williamson and Johnston's six themes. These two views of middle schooling discuss concepts and ideas, such as learning communities, developmental responsiveness, engaging parents, and meaningful adult-student relationships. They do not assume that every school can and will implement a structured advisory program, offers exploratory courses, or utilizes a block schedule. These views of middle schooling have greater transferability than lists of essential characteristics or elements.

Middle school literature that recommends or defines appropriate middle school practices has purported to base these on sound theories of adolescent development. In reality, this link can not always be established. Some middle school practices, such as varied instruction and student advisement can be traced to the cognitive and psycho-social developmental needs of adolescents. However, many characteristics such as a shared decision-making model, continuous staff development, and interdisciplinary teams are not direct outcomes of the desire to be "developmentally responsive." They are sound educational practices that can be found in other schools, not just middle schools.

This purpose of this study is to explore meanings of "middle school" within a naturalistic setting of three middle schools. It is based on reality, not ideals espoused in literature. It will explore which middle school aspects are important or crucial to the individuals who have created and continue to sustain the middle schools. The beliefs about adolescent education will be derived from each school's staff members, not from a philosophy developed by a middle school scholar. As a result, the proceeding descriptions of three middle schools and the identification of common middle school themes will provide more realistic definitions of "middle school." They will also be more transferable to other middle schools.

Chapter 3

FINDINGS

After three Alberta middle schools were selected and agreed to participate in the study, the researcher spent two days at each school collecting data. This process involved generating field notes based on general observations of school operations, conducting two semi-structured, audio taped interviews with the principal and a key middle school teacher, conducting informal interviews with numerous staff members, and collecting pertinent school literature. The interviews were transcribed and the informal interview notes and observation field notes typed into a readable form.

The researcher used an open coding method of data analysis. After the data were open coded two or three times, the researcher generated appropriate categories for the data. The coded data were then re-organized into categories and written into categorized notes. These categorized notes were then written into text: the school descriptions. The generated categories differ among the three schools because of the uniqueness of each school's organizational structure and programming. As much as possible, original school terms were used as section headings in order to capture the spirit and language of each school.

The results of this process of data analysis are three comprehensive, yet concise descriptions, or portraits, of three Alberta middle schools: Delta Lake Middle School, Rosewood Middle School, and Silver Creek Middle School.

The following three descriptions represent the findings of the study. In addition, as they were written, several common themes emerged. These themes illustrate the connectedness among the schools; a connectedness that overshadows the differences in school programs, organization, and language. The themes do not serve to define the "true" or "exemplary" middle school or to prescribe the essential ingredients for creating a successful middle school. Rather, they reinforce the educational beliefs and practices that these three middle schools have discovered to be important and critical to their success.

Delta Lake Middle School

Delta Lake Junior High School has been serving the educational needs of approximately 500 students from grades seven to nine since its opening in August 1992. It is an urban school located in a newer residential community. The staff consists of one principal, two curriculum coordinators (0.6), one assistant curriculum coordinator (0.4), 24 teachers, seven support staff members, and four custodial staff members.

School Demographics

Within the community, there is a high degree of multi-cultural representation, mainly East Indian and Asian. Of the parents in the school community, 48% were not educated in Canada, and in 33% of the homes, English is not the primary language spoken. A minority of the students received their education outside Canada prior to attending Delta Lake and 15% consider English their second language. The social and economic demographics vary.

Technological Facilities

As the building is only four and one half years old, its design and construction still maintains a new and modern quality. Located beside one of its feeder elementary schools, the school enjoy spacious grounds on a quiet residential street. The school's entrance opens up to a large atrium area and two open staircases that lead to the second story classrooms. The upper hallway is partially open, overlooks the atrium area, and is lined with large plants. Large colourfully sewn banners hang from the tall ceilings. The atrium area is used for multiple purposes: as a teaching space, a lunch area, a large group meeting area, and a student congregation area before and after school. The school's facilities include two science laboratories, a large resource library, a design and technology lab with up-to-date science and technology equipment, a fully equipped home economics lab, a large gymnasium with locker rooms, a physical activity room, an art room with artist desks, a music room, a drama room, and a student leadership room.

The school is also equipped with a computer local area network which extends throughout the school. All of the computers are connected to this school wide network which in turn is connected to the district network and the Internet. Each classroom is equipped with a teacher workstation. Student workstations are distributed within

classrooms and in clusters within the school. These stations are shared amongst all students to provide one of the highest student-to-computer ratios in the city. The library, the design and technology lab, and the visual arts lab have clusters of work stations. The library utilizes a computerized card catalogue. CD-Rom and laser disk technology provide students with the most current learning resources.

School Philosophy

School Mission Statement: "We believe that all students achieve by progressing at a rate that emphasizes maximum challenge, success and growth. We organize for instruction with the intent of promoting healthy, self-sufficient, empowered and contributing members of society."

The school's guiding philosophy and core beliefs have evolved very much from "the ground up." Its founding and present principal, Karen Whitney, centred her vision around the principles in the report of the Carnegie Council on the Education of Young Adolescents titled Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century . Using this document as a basis for discussion, four committees comprising of staff, students, parents and influential professionals created a vision for the new school.

The core principle underlying the school's philosophy is the recognition that adolescents have unique academic, social, behavioural and physical needs and may demonstrate these at different developmental levels. Consequently, schooling for the middle years must reflect the needs of adolescents. At Delta Lake, they believe that students learn best in a trusting, challenging, and caring learning environment. They also believe that all students need to be recognized as individuals and should be encouraged to demonstrate their learning in the way that is most suited to their needs. Differences and uniqueness should be celebrated. By creating an environment where students are connected to adults and by recognizing the uniqueness and differences associated with adolescence, students can achieve academic excellence. The school's philosophy statement and its core beliefs are at the heart of every aspect of its organization and operation. These beliefs will be used to introduce the school: its organization, staff, and programs.

Organizing Students for Learning: The Family Model

"We believe that students learn best in a trusting, challenging, and caring learning environment."

This belief provides the primary structure for organizing students for learning in the school. The "family model" is operationalized through a key teacher arrangement. A consistent group of peers and a teacher become like a family as they progress through the grades. Teacher team structures are also established and maintained within each grade, extending the "family" concept to the teachers of each grade level.

Key Teacher Arrangement. Students in grade seven are assigned to a teacher and a peer group that remains with them until they leave the school in grade nine. This teacher provides instruction in all four core subjects, providing an easy transition from the self-contained elementary classroom. It also provides for thematic development of the curriculum. The key teacher program begins with entry interviews to establish a personalized program plan for all students. A strong communication link between the home and school is also established early on. The arrangement is intended to promote a smooth transition from one year to the next and also help ensure continuous advancement along the curriculum continuum. At the grade eight and nine levels, another teacher complements the learning group, sharing the core instruction with the key teacher. Through creating opportunities for people to be together with the same group of people and providing support and understanding throughout the transitional years, a "family-like" structure is created. It is important to emphasize that as in all educational practices, some flexibility has been maintained in this arrangement to provide for student and teacher needs. Some teachers have not adopted the teacher progression model and sometimes group dynamics or individual student circumstances warrant changes to the learning group.

Organization of Time. The core and semi-core teaching arrangement and the interdisciplinary teaming in the school enables instructional time to be flexibly scheduled by individual teachers or teams of teachers, particularly at the grade seven and eight level. Teachers are given larger blocks of time for their core and semi-core curriculum programs

thus minimizing the "start and stop" work atmosphere. A flexible schedule also allows for integration of the curriculum and for individual learning paces to be accommodated. Even the learning resource centre in the school operates on a flexible schedule, changing continuously to accommodate individual and whole class needs.

At present, there are some subjects that need to be scheduled. Specialist subjects such as the exploratory courses and French must be scheduled formally. In addition, because the school offers some individual and small group assistance and enrichment on a pull-out basis, this must be coordinated on the timetable. In the future, the school hopes to make the timetable increasingly flexible in order to better accommodate learner needs.

Teacher Teaming

Teacher teaming provides a strong backbone structure for the school. Several belief statements emphasize the importance of teacher teaming at Delta Lake:

"We believe that teachers are more effective when given the opportunity to work together."

"We believe that teachers must work together to provide connections for learning for students."

"We believe that teachers need collegial support to be effective."

"We believe that team time to plan for year key teachers is essential in an interdisciplinary school."

At Delta Lake, teacher teams are also an integral component of how the "family model" functions. Teachers are teamed by grade and are provided with common planning and meeting times within their schedule. According to the principal, "The teachers meet a lot, are together a lot, and even socialize together." At a decision-making level, each team works together to provide input into decisions made at their grade level and the school level. Each team has a team leader who is also a member of the leadership team. This ensures a reciprocal flow of communication among the various levels in the school. Team meetings also provide opportunities for teachers to discuss curriculum, integrate projects, organize teaching time, and provide all types of support for each other.

Ensuring Success for All Students

"We believe that all students can continue to learn and that the students' level of learning determines the starting point."

"We believe that individual student differences require individualized instruction and planning."

Being responsive to the needs of students is a primary focus at Delta Lake, and this is reflected in a continuous examination of the manner in which programs are structured to meet individual or group needs. Once again, the concept of flexibility in time, resources, groupings, and instructional strategies provides the basis for ensuring all students are successful. As Sherry Goshan, one of the curriculum coordinators, points out, "There are a broad range of programming adjustments that need to be made in each classroom as there is a wide range of grade levels in each class."

Special Needs and ESL Programming. Since student needs are perceived as being unique and individual, their specific needs are met in an individualized way. Key teachers are responsible for creating and implementing Individual Education Plans which allow for variations in time, resources and strategies in learning to occur. At the grade eight and nine levels, these plans are also given to the students' other teachers. The core and semi-core structure allows teachers to become aware of their students' strengths and weaknesses thus enabling them to provide appropriate programs.

There are also various support structures available to teachers to assist with programming for special needs students. The school's counselling team, which includes teachers with special education training and experience, also works with teachers to provide support with individual program planning. The teacher leader of the counselling team, the assistant curriculum coordinator, oversees the special needs program and provides some scheduled time for meeting with individual students. Teacher assistants provide support to special needs students within the classroom and sometimes on an individual or small group pull-out basis. To further ensure success for all students, the school offers special help classes outside of school hours, a learning skills class, and a general "no tolerance" policy toward failure.

Enrichment Programming. This year marks a transitional period for enrichment programming in the school. The enrichment program, STAMP (Science, Technology and Advanced Math Preparation), is implemented at the grade eight and nine level. The STAMP students are placed in particular classes so they can be regrouped for STAMP classes. This school year, the school has incorporated the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program (IBMYP) beginning at grade seven. This program is aimed at challenging all students at the grade seven level and then challenging those who wish to continue with the program at the grade eight and nine levels. Two classes have been formed from the students most likely to continue with the IBMYP through to grade nine. This year at the grade eight level some aspects of the Middle Years Program have been incorporated into the core subjects. Also, all grade levels are being introduced to the IBMYP's curriculum themes, called "areas of interaction", which are compatible with the interdisciplinary approaches already used in the school.

Curriculum

"We believe that the curriculum must be made to be meaningful and concrete for students."

"We believe in the development of the whole student."

"We believe that what we teach must be a reflection of needs for the future."

The interdisciplinary approach to learning, formalized by the Middle Years Program, is most developed at the grade seven level where the key teacher provides instruction in all four core subjects. At the grade eight level the core subjects are split in the following manner: (a) science and social studies and (b) math and language arts. These subjects are arranged to reflect the common learning processes of the two subjects grouped together. At the grade nine level, the subjects are arranged differently: (a) math/science/technology and (b) social studies/language arts. At this level, the students are able to make the connections between the subject areas, yet there is some separation in order to provide a transition to high school. As much as possible, the disciplines in each group are integrated for student learning.

The International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program. The implementation of the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program or IBMYP at Delta Lake provides a structure and language for the core curriculum programming that is already present in the school. Built on the philosophy that middle level students are unique and that all students can learn and accelerate their learning, the program is a natural fit to the school's own belief structure.

The aim of the IBMYP is to stimulate the intelligence of the students and help them relate the content of the classroom to the local and international community. The emphasis is on the development of the whole person. The model connects eight subject areas and develops them through five areas of interaction. The eight subjects are aligned with the Alberta Education program of studies. The five areas of interaction provide opportunities for students to develop learning to learn skills, offer community services, develop creativity and inventiveness and participate in conservation and environmental stewardship. These five areas of interaction include:

1. Approaches to learning - study skills, learning to learn expectations, skills to help nurture discipline, independent thought and capacity for problem solving and decision making.
2. Community service - encourages participation in local events, and provides opportunities for students to contribute to the well-being of society.
3. Health and social education - preparing students to balance physical and academic activities, make informed choices and develop respect for both body and mind.
4. Environment - conservation and global stewardship.
5. Homo Faber - focuses on creativity and inventiveness.

Literary and research skills are also stressed in connection with the personal project aspect of the IBMYP which the students work on throughout the program until its culmination in the fifth year (grade 10). Rather than altering the school's enrichment programming, the IBMYP serves to define what the school is already doing.

Beyond Core Curriculum

"We believe in the development of the 'whole' student."

"We believe that students should have opportunities to develop individual interests, abilities, talents and competencies."

Although these beliefs are articulated through core curriculum learning experiences, students are also provided opportunities to pursue their individual interests through both formal and extra-curricular sports programs, complementary courses and school clubs. These programs further extend the notion of developing the "whole" student in other environments, some of which are less focused on achievement.

The school offers several complementary courses in the areas of applied and practical arts, fine and performing arts, and French as a second language. In year 7, students experience all of the six practical arts modules within the Career and Technology Services (CTS) program and choose a fine or performing arts to specialize in. The Career and Technology Services program is offered in half-year modules at the grade eight and nine levels.

The goal of the extra-curricular programs at Delta Lake is to meet the varied needs and interests of students with programs that provide regular success experiences for all students. The school's extra-curricular sports programs emphasize participation and skill development. All students are encouraged to join a sports team and as many "junior teams" as are required are formed so that all students can experience being part of a team. The school must continue to fit into the district's competitive sports program, and, hence, they also field a competitive team. Many noon hour and some after school club activities are formed in the school based on student interest and the availability of a teacher sponsor.

Technology and Learning

"We believe that students have to have the tools to deal with a changing and highly technological society and what we teach must be a reflection of needs for the future."

"We believe students should have access to and the ability to use technology in a variety of curricular areas in order to gain real world experiences."

At Delta Lake an "emphasis is placed on educating students with the necessary skills for entry into the 21st century." The "Integrated Technology for Learning" system connects all computers to a school-wide network and ultimately the district network and

the Internet. This ensures that all students have regular access to forms of technology. Students receive formal instruction on how to use computer technology in both core and exploratory curriculum programs. In addition, "technology in the curriculum" focus months are planned for each grade level to further ensure that students utilize the school's technology within the context of curriculum.

Instructional and Assessment Practices

"We believe that students learn by doing."

"We believe students need to be assessed in a variety of ways."

One of the school's primary focus for staff development is how to better engage students in the learning process: "minds-on learning." At the classroom level, this translates into facilitating a variety of instructional strategies. In addition, the size of a student learning group varies and is often determined by students themselves. Cooperative learning, hands-on learning, project work, and use of technology for both enhancing learning and demonstrating learning are just a few of the commonly practised instructional strategies in the school.

The teaching staff also strives to ensure that assessment strategies are aligned with the curriculum that is mandated, the curriculum that is taught and the curriculum that is learned by students. Teachers spend a great deal of time examining "what it is they should be teaching" and "what should be assessed." The incorporation of the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program provides validation for the use of a variety of methods to collect information about individual student achievement. Through the use of teacher observation, oral and written tests, interviews and questions, analysis of student writing and journals, student self-assessment, student demonstration, and student portfolios, teachers create achievement profiles for all students.

The portfolio provides the basis for each student's achievement profile. This is shared with parents through comprehensive anecdotal progress reports. These reports also include a goal-setting process, completed jointly by parents, students and teachers. Besides the report, student progress is communicated to parents through phone calls and letters.

As part of the school's open door policy for parents, student/parent/teacher conferences occur at any time of the year and parents are invited to visit their child's class at any time.

Developing Adult-Student Relationships

"We believe that all staff are mentors and models and that everyone is a learner and everyone is a teacher."

"We believe that building personal relationships with students provides stability, continuity, and the opportunity to grow within a safe environment."

The key teacher arrangement fulfills the middle level need to have one adult in the building who can be a mentor and a model to them: someone they can identify with and approach for problems of both an academic or social nature. During the first year of Delta Lake's operation, a structured advisory program was established to meet this need. However, when the school moved to the key teacher arrangement, the connectivity between teachers and students was accomplished and the advisory program discontinued.

The key teacher is the student's "first line" counsellor. When more formalized counselling services are required, a student is referred to the school's counselling team. The students are able to choose an adult from the team with whom they have already developed a relationship. Connecting students with adults who know them best and can track them for a prolonged period of time improves continuity. The counselling team also meets weekly to review a "student watch list." This is a list of students whose attendance, behaviour, progress or emotional state requires monitoring. Interestingly, the administrative team also develops a "staff watch" list in which any staff members who may be under stress, ill or experiencing personal or professional problems are identified and discussed at weekly administrative team meetings. The two watch lists are examples of how the "family model" is translated into action; the school is a family in which all members strive to be caring and supportive.

The Staff at Delta Lake

"The true strength of our school is our staff: they are concerned, caring and competent."

"We believe that all staff are mentors and models and that everyone is a learner and everyone is a teacher."

At the heart of Delta Lake Middle School is its staff: the administrators, teachers, and support staff members who take their vision of a middle school and transform it into a real and dynamic learning environment. To create an ideal middle school staff, the principal exercises control over the staff selection process and considers several criteria. She also models middle school beliefs and practices and facilitates a continuous process of staff development.

Characteristics of Staff Members. The commitment to middle level education at Delta Lake begins with the selection of its staff members. The opportunity for Karen, the principal, to select the school staff ensures that the teachers' beliefs and characteristics are consistent with the vision of the school. Although their educational and professional backgrounds vary, the teachers are selected based on a few key characteristics. Being a "team player", being a continuous learner and being a "mover and shaker" - a teacher who is willing to take the initiative, are essential characteristics. In addition, the teachers who are selected also believe that changes in middle level education are needed based on their previous experiences at the middle level. Karen emphasized that "whether or not they walked in with the book on middle school philosophy was not important."

The teachers at Delta Lake are also described by the principal and curriculum coordinator as very high caliber teachers who are willing to accept the burden of core or semi-core teaching and the multi-year program. Sherry Goshan describes many of the teachers as "jacks of all trades" and "masters of one or two." This quality is required for a more generalist school format, particularly at the grade seven level. Due to the demanding nature of the key teacher, multi-year program, the school tends to attract relatively young, energetic and highly enthusiastic teachers. Working with middle level students is generally their first choice for a teaching assignment.

Other teachers in the school stress the ability and desire to develop relationships with students as key to being both a teacher and advisor to students. One teacher described the key teacher role as one that extends beyond instruction. Key teachers take responsibility

for all aspects of a student's well being. Being patient, having a sense of humour and being accepting of the varied and changing needs of middle level students is also described as being important at Delta Lake School. Although varied in their teaching style and personality, the one quality that all staff members share is their desire to work with middle level students.

The School Leader. At Delta Lake the principal's leadership style is complementary to the characteristics of the staff. Because the teachers are initiators and continuous learners, the administrator's role has tended to be to support and facilitate teacher ideas and initiatives. In addition, with such strong leaders on staff, the administrator is able to give away power to other staff members, or is willing to "entertain roving leadership," as Karen describes it.

A strong visionary leader, her vision for the school and her beliefs about middle school education are clearly modelled in her administrative style and behaviours. She provides instructional leadership by being committed to pedagogy herself and by continuously striving to ensure that the school remains committed to pedagogy, as well. She is a risk-taker, a "what-ifer", an administrator who always has her "head in the stars", but is not afraid to have her "feet in the dirt." She takes a strong interest in the students and has a highly visible presence in the school. She visits classrooms daily, interacting with students and keeping close to all classroom activity.

Staff Development. Since everyone is a "learner" at Delta Lake, staff development plays a prominent role in the school's goals and priorities. The staff's rich expertise is used extensively to provide internal professional development. This year, the teachers have also been seeking out "world class teaching" in other junior high schools as recognition of the importance of bringing in new ideas and challenging some of the educational practices at Delta Lake.

Several school structures support staff development and enable it to happen continuously. The nature of the interdisciplinary team structure provides the opportunity for the expertise on staff to be shared. Using the school's electronic mail system and holding two short staff meetings a week allows the monthly staff meetings to be used

exclusively for professional development. This year monthly staff meetings have focused on the following topics: progress reporting, Individual Education Plans, programming for special needs students, strategies to improve student achievement, Dimensions of Learning, technology integration, midterm assessment, curriculum, resources, and comparing student work for evaluation. In addition, two school professional development days have been planned for the 1996-97 school year to explore the use of technology in the school and the interaction areas of the new International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program. There has also been professional development to assist with the implementation of the Western Canadian Math Curriculum and cross-graded monthly math in-servicing to discuss math teaching strategies.

The staff evaluation process at Delta Lake also provides meaningful professional development for teachers. Through the development of a professional portfolio, teachers demonstrate their teaching competencies and accomplishments. Teachers must also set professional objectives and a plan of action to achieve these objectives. The portfolio must also includes summaries of classroom observations by a peer and the principal, an informal written observation by a colleague, a professional profile, and the team's classroom management plan. Teachers may also choose other documents which demonstrate their accomplishments and competencies for the portfolio. Like the student's portfolio, the teacher's portfolio provides the basis for the written performance review prepared by the principal every three years. The results indicated through the portfolios are connected to the results achieved in the school. This helps to ensure that the vision of the staff is consistent with the vision of the school.

School Wide Leadership and Decision-Making

"We need to engage all stake holders at the school level in the discussion of what is good and not good in schools."

"Teachers and students in the middle school are empowered. Decisions are made at the right level: where all of the action is happening, in the classroom."

One aspect of the school that has evolved since the beginning is its reliance on input from an increased number of stakeholders groups about how the school should operate.

The creation of leadership teams has brought about a more shared type of leadership structure. It has also allowed many more teacher leaders to emerge.

The leadership team organization occurs at every level in the school, from students up to the administration. It is through this authentic collaboration between and among teachers, administrators, parents and students that decisions at Delta Lake school are made. Most decisions, as long as they do not impact another classroom, are made at the classroom level. When decisions do impact another classroom, they must be made at the grade team level. When decisions affect the entire school, they are made at the leadership team level. Although only staff members comprise the leadership teams, representation also occurs at the student and parent level through the student advisory council, student leadership team, and the school council.

Leadership Teams. There are four leadership teams at the staff level: the support services team, the technology services team, the instructional services team, and the administrative services team. Generally, staff members are part of a team through position or selection.

The support services team provides assistance and support for teachers, students and parents. Members of the team assist teachers in programming, developing and implementing Individual Education Plans or behaviour plans for students in need. They also counsel students who are referred to them, test students who are identified by key teachers for special programs, link students and families with outside agencies and develop and implement a chronic attendance problem plan. Leading this team is the assistant curriculum coordinator. The team also consists of three school counsellors whose roles include providing second line support for students and parents, staff support, wellness and morale and attending leadership meetings. There are also six grade counsellors who actively support the school wide positive conduct plan, agree to be a sending classroom for student conduct, act in a second line counselling support to key teachers and provide input into modification of the school conduct plan.

The technology services team provides technology integration in the school, administrative technical support, teacher in-servicing, and communications throughout the

school. This team consists of a curriculum coordinator, a technician, a lead teacher, a learning resources teacher, team technological teachers, a network operator and technical support people for after school hours.

The instructional services team consists of two curriculum coordinators, three school counsellors, four master teachers and the grade 7, 8, and 9 lead teachers. Master teachers have several responsibilities: (a) Mentor teachers new to Delta Lake, (b) provide collaborative peer observations and one-on-ones, (c) provide input and assistance into the planning for the professional growth of staff, (d) provide input into the process for performance appraisal of staff, provide leadership in the school events, (e) chair ad hoc committees, (f) model master teaching practices and showcase these to visitors, (g) provide leadership in curriculum and assessment and attend leadership meetings.

Lead teachers not only attend and contribute to leadership meetings, but also fulfill the following roles: (a) facilitate the grade level team time, (b) enhance team unity, (c) plan for the expenditures of team resources, (d) coordinate curriculum planning, (e) coordinate grade events, (f) support and encourage staff, (g) contribute to the daily, weekly and yearly organization of the school, (h) assist with school wide events, and assist with student conduct. The lead teachers also rotate their attendance at the school council meetings and may be assigned other duties which vary according to the grade level and teacher.

The administrative services team includes the principal, the two curriculum coordinators and the assistant curriculum coordinator. This team along with the lead teachers, the master teachers, and the three school counsellors also constitute the leadership level, which is a fair representation of the views of the other staff levels in the school. The principal's primary roles include: (a) managing the staff and school organization, (b) supervising all of the teaching staff, (c) providing leadership with respect to student conduct, (d) organizing the timetable, and (e) attending school council meetings. Other administrative roles are split between the two curriculum coordinators and the assistant curriculum coordinators.

Student Leadership. "We believe that students should be involved in as many aspects of the school as possible."

"We believe that it is important for students to develop leadership abilities and learn the value of citizenship through the application of democratic practices."

Student leadership provides the students at Delta Lake with opportunities for active management of school affairs. There are two formal structures that empower students. The student advisory group meets with the principal weekly to discuss school issues and concerns. The student council gives input into the school processes and organization. It consists of two student representatives per class. Representatives discuss and resolve problems as well as hold positions on various committees.

Student involvement in school decision-making and operation is also facilitated by what Sherry Goshan describes as an "open door policy:" an atmosphere has been created in the school where students feel free to bring their ideas, concerns, and questions to the staff.

Parents as Partners. "We believe that parent interest and involvement in their child's learning is the single most determining factor in student academic achievement."

"We believe that effective ongoing communication between home and school is one of the most effective predictors of student success."

Parents become partners in the education of their children through various informal and formal enabling school programs. The school maintains an attitude that parent contact is an opportunity to improve the school by establishing a more positive, open relationship between the home and school. Open communication and parent education programs help to ensure that parents are actively engaged in the learning of their child.

The school council provides formal input into the decision making processes in the school. The "open door policy" also extends to parents. Parents are encouraged to contact teachers and administrators throughout the day, thus ensuring authentic input into the school's operation. Communication between school and home is facilitated in a variety of ways and occurs throughout the school year. Teachers are encouraged to report positive behaviours to parents weekly and any difficulties immediately. Each key group produces a bi-monthly class newsletter communicating curriculum related successes, the content of the course, and ways to assist students at home.

At Delta Lake, the statement that "parents are the child's first teachers" communicates the important role that parents play in supporting their child's learning throughout their schooling. The school council established from the beginning in its mission that the primary role of parents in the community is to "support learning." The school encourages this involvement through several programs. Open door evenings showcase students' work for their parents and allow parents to work on assignments with their children at the school. The school holds workshops on parenting adolescents, and provides resources to help parents understand the transition that adolescents are going through. The school as a whole makes great efforts to help parents understand that although their role changes as their children develop, it is still important in the education process.

Community Connections

"It's the idea of putting back into the community versus taking from the community that is so important."

In addition to the school-parent partnerships, connecting the school to the community occurs through providing service to the community and using community services to enrich the instructional and extra-curricular programs.

One of the newly established International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program goals is to help students make valuable contributions to the community and provide opportunities for students to apply knowledge and skills learned at school to the world of work. All students in the school are invited to participate in the community services project which is organized and monitored by the learning skills teachers. Community services include: (a) any service to another for which the student receives no monetary benefit, (b) any service that is not expected as part of the student's responsibility as a member of a family, club or organization, and (c) any service that can be confirmed and evaluated by an adult. Students participating in the program receive marks towards the learning skill class based on the number of hours of service per term. The program differs at each grade level. Grade sevens provide service to the school or their immediate family. Grade eight students can also provide service to the immediate community and grade nine students can extend their service realm to include the city. Many students provide service

to their former elementary schools. Conversely, several former Delta Lake students return to coach teams, assist with running clubs, and help teachers in the classroom. The Middle Years Program also encourages students to serve a local or international charity group. Besides taking the students into the community, Delta Lake has also opened up its doors to both residents and businesses in the nearby and larger community. Community residents are invited to the school for various events as frequently as possible and are kept abreast of Delta Lake through home-delivered newsletters. Formal opportunities for involvement with the nearby and larger community include such events as the literary read-in, and the science fair which brings representatives from Science Alberta into the school. The school has also developed several business partnerships during the last few years.

School Climate

"We believe that all students have the right to learn and all teachers the right to teach in a positive, caring, and safe environment where rights and responsibilities are clear and reasonable reflections of society."

"We believe that positive behaviour is a learned process and that as teachers we must focus on teaching and modelling the attitudes and behaviours of appropriate learning and citizenship."

The staff, students, parents and the community have cooperatively established a positive school climate plan in support of the school district guidelines for student behaviour. The plan is aimed at ensuring that positive behaviour is recognized and encouraged. Conversely, any behaviour that disrupts or detracts from the educational climate of the school is clearly outlined and discouraged. This cooperative plan both teaches acceptable behaviour and ensures that students learn to be responsible and accountable for their behaviour. Throughout the plan, the importance of preserving student esteem is emphasized. "Preventative dimension" programs also create a positive climate by making students feel that they are capable, connected and contributing members of the school.

Positive Behaviour. "The preservation of student esteem is most important to the positive climate of the school."

Encouraging and recognizing the positive behaviours and academic successes of students is an important way to preserve student esteem in the school. Positive referral letters or phone calls to the office and home by key teachers, positive recognition of student achievement at assemblies and school announcements, and positive feedback to entire student groups at grade level meetings are ongoing ways to recognize students. In addition, the school's awards programs recognizes student accomplishments in a more formal way. At the classroom level, student achievement within the key group is awarded. At the end of each term, students receive recognition at grade level meetings for academics, student growth and perfect attendance. An awards night is conducted annually in which achievement in areas of academics, athletics, fine arts, home economics, design and technology, service and citizenship is awarded. The "Delta Lake Award" is given to students at each of the three years groupings who best exemplify the qualities of the school's vision.

Behaviour Management. Behaviour management policies and plans in the school are rooted in the belief that any behaviour that disrupts or detracts from the climate of the school is unacceptable and infringes upon the rights of others. All of the students and staff at the school are expected to take responsibility for responding when a student infringes upon the rights of others.

Minor infringements are dealt with immediately by staff using low key problem solving. Students whose behaviour interferes with learning, impairs the functioning of the school or threatens the safety or well-being of others fill in a student choice helper. In this form they identify their behaviour, the choices they have made and then reflect on what they would do in the future if the situation arose again. The administration and the teacher decide on a consequence and the incident is then recorded and tracked through a computer monitoring program. In addition to school-wide behaviour management, all key teachers must develop an individual classroom behaviour plan which establishes appropriate responses to students who do not meet the teachers' expectations.

The Preventative Dimension. The preventative dimension of the positive behaviour plan encompasses a range of school programs and teacher behaviours which contribute to a positive school climate by ensuring that students contribute, are connected, and are successful in their learning. The positive behaviour plan is one of these dimensions. The other dimensions can be found in all aspects of the school, from its belief system to the structures and programs that operationalize it.

The students have considerable input into their learning at various decision-making levels. At the classroom level, students have some choices with respect to curriculum and learning strategies. They also participate in the evaluation of their learning. Programs such as the student leadership team and the student advisory group are formal ways of empowering students in the school.

The key teacher arrangement provides for considerable visibility and connectedness to students. Key teachers as "first line counsellors" and the "second line" counselling team help to ensure that student problems are addressed pro-actively. The key teacher arrangement gives the students a stronger sense of security about their learning because they know that there is at least one adult in the building who knows and understands their specific learning needs. The qualities of the teachers, their high energy levels, enthusiasm and positive attitudes toward working with middle level learners tends to also rub off on student attitude and behaviour.

High standards for achievement, safety, conduct, and wellness permeate the school. Having common standards for students from classroom to classroom helps to ensure that student conduct is taught and reinforced consistently and that teachers are committed to maximizing the potential of all students. The "no tolerance" policy towards failure creates more success for students in all areas of their learning. Though student conduct was an issue at the school's inception, through its Positive School Climate Plan, Delta Lake has created a positive, caring and safe environment in which students can learn and teachers can teach.

The Success of Delta Lake

According to the principal, Karen Whitney, success in a school occurs when the school is serving all of its stakeholders and they are satisfied with the service. From the Survey Results Review, Delta Lake, its leadership, teachers, and programs, has the overwhelming support of its stakeholders. In addition, there is a belief among the stakeholders that Delta Lake school has achieved a positive climate for all.

There is no one factor that can be attributed to the support that Delta Lake enjoys from its stakeholders: it is a merging of beliefs, programs, people, and attitudes that contributes to a positive climate where learning and success occurs. Specifically, at Delta Lake, everyone has the chance to grow and to learn. With the changes in grade level, curriculum, and teaming opportunities there are many ways for staff to grow personally and professionally. For both staff and students, it is a healthy supportive environment rich in opportunities to learn. The emphasis on achievement and continual dialogue on improving student achievement contributes greatly to the support the school receives from its stakeholders. Teachers continuously ask, "How does this relate to curriculum and achievement?" and continuously measure achievement in order to improve teaching practices. Finally, the large amount of time that teachers can devote to students through its key teacher arrangement is considered to be a primary factor in its success.

Challenges and Issues

The development of a school with a unique philosophy and manner of programming also presents both challenges and issues for its staff members. At Delta Lake, challenges and issues are addressed and/or resolved through the leadership teams or by becoming targeted areas for school improvement.

Because Delta Lake has developed a strong vision and belief structure, bringing together individuals on a staff with varied professional backgrounds and beliefs about education has and continues to be a source of challenge. While the goal is to not to have all staff members "look the same," continuously having pockets of dissidence on staff can make it more difficult for a school, particularly one in that is constantly in a state of change.

The nature of the school's teaching arrangement also presents a major challenge for its staff. With the multi-year core/semi-core program, teachers must learn and teach new curriculum every year. This is difficult, particularly for new staff who have not rotated through the grades yet. Living up to the very high personal standards and levels of perfectionism and commitment that the staff has set for themselves involves considerable energy and work. Consequently, some teachers find the balance between their professional and personal life an ongoing challenge. To address teacher stress, the administrative services team keeps a "staff watch list" that allows them to identify and provide support to staff members who may be experiencing professional or personal difficulties. The interdisciplinary team structure and teacher mentors also provide support to teachers who are learning new curriculum.

The core and semi-core program is an ongoing issue for the staff. Being a generalist at the grade seven level can mean teaching out of some teachers' comfort zone. Some teachers prefer to be more a subject specialist and will only teach within the semi-core structure. The key teacher arrangement can be a positive or negative experience depending on the particular class. Having a difficult group of students for four core subjects all year is extremely draining. Some teachers believe that it is not always advantageous for the students to have one teacher for all four core subjects; students benefit from different teaching styles. Other teachers feel that the advantages of the core and semi-core grouping outweigh the challenges. They believe strongly that the opportunity to provide a consistent learning environment in which teachers know their students well increases the amount that students progress through the school year.

The teaming concept can also be an issue, particularly for teachers who are new to the school. The interdisciplinary team is a teacher's primary support structure as well as a means of participating in school decision-making. For some teachers the idea of "are we all doing this?" can mean less autonomy in the classroom. Being a team player means being tolerant, listening to other viewpoints and ways of doing things, and ultimately compromising. The balance between running your own classroom and being part of a grade level team is therefore an ongoing issue.

The nature of heterogenous groupings and the drive to meet student needs provide another challenge at Delta Lake. The inclusion of students with special needs in the classroom means that key teachers must develop and implement individualized education plans. This can be an additional responsibility for teachers who are more familiar with segregated special education settings. Ensuring that students' needs are being met in the inclusive setting and that teachers receive adequate support are ongoing topics for consideration and discussion for the assistant curriculum coordinator and the support services team.

The curriculum coordinator, Sherry Goshan, cites the continuous struggle to maintain the present conditions for learning as one of the main challenges at the school. In fact, the success of the school is also its biggest challenge. The learning environment is constantly changing and growing in order to be responsive. This is rewarding and exciting, but can also be draining and challenging for staff members.

The Continuous State of Change

"The extent that you take that change and the extent that your school changes over a period of time determines a true middle school."

Karen Whitney cites one of the primary differences between a school like Delta Lake and a traditional junior high school as being the fact that Delta Lake is in a continual process of change. Because the focal point for a middle school is being responsive to the needs of students, a school must be in a state of continuous renewal.

1992 - Present. Since its opening in 1992, substantial changes have been made in Delta Lake's decision-making process: the increased involvement of its stakeholder groups and the creation of shared leadership through leadership teams. The team structure has allowed teachers to access the expertise in the school in order to meet the needs of staff and students more efficiently. It has also created many more leaders than it had in its first year.

The school has also realized the necessity to become more flexible in order to respond continuously to stakeholder needs. Staff members at Delta Lake find themselves becoming more flexible with respect to their own teaching abilities because of frequent

grade and subject changes. Teachers now learn much faster than in the first years; they are now taking in more information, examining data more closely and more frequently and reflecting on the how and why the school does what it does. This self-examination process and the need to be flexible has led to changes and improvements in how programs operate. For example, not all teachers move through the grade levels with their group; some opt to remain at one grade level and teach the same subject areas. In addition, some students do not stay with the same peer group for their entire school experience at Lake Delta. Being flexible and responsive have been underlying currents in the school's evolution, and will continue to be in the future.

The Future. After spending three years developing its core beliefs and the enabling structures that support these beliefs, Delta Lake has now arrived at the most substantive period of self-examination to-date. Through professional development, interdisciplinary and leadership teamwork, and regular staff meetings, staff members are taking the opportunity to reflect on their beliefs and structures in order to determine whether these continue to be what is best for student achievement at this level. In addition to staff-determined areas of review, the results of school-wide surveys of staff, parents, and students have helped to determine the school's direction. Maintaining a positive school climate in which students are challenged means that the school has to stay responsive to its stake holders.

Delta Lake hopes to further extend its flexible use of time in the school. The removal of scheduling barriers for all subjects, including the complementary courses, is an area that is being explored next year. In addition, in the near future the school hopes to explore the idea of individual tracking. This would allow students to learn in the mode, time-frame, or environment that is most suited to them.

The gradual replacement of the STAMP enrichment program with the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program will continue to be a focus area for the next school. Within this program, Delta Lake hopes that students will meet standards of excellence through a more integrated curriculum. Based on the results review, Delta Lake has also targeted monitoring and assessment of student achievement for professional development

and new school initiatives during the next school year. Student achievement will be monitored and reported on a monthly basis so that instructional resources and support for students can be realigned as needed.

In 1997, as part of the priority to achieve high standards of conduct, safety and wellness, the school will implement a behaviour tracking system that will be available to all staff. The system will be used to track both positive and negative conduct occurrences between students and with staff. It will be maintained by key teachers and will assist teachers, counsellors and leadership staff to respond appropriately to student changes in both positive and negative behaviour.

The goals for technology include both expanding the types of technology in the school and increasing accessibility. Next year, Career and Technology Studies modules will be offered to all students. New technology will be purchased on an ongoing basis under the guideline that at least 20 percent of the hardware available be current models. A school television network will enable students to access different teachers for their course work. Electronic communications allowing students to access resources from their homes will also be explored in the future.

Delta Lake: Responsive and Responsible

Delta Lake Middle School's principal, Karen Whitney, defines the two key characteristics of Delta Lake Middle School as being responsive and responsible. Specifically, this refers to the fact that the school is responsible to the students and community to create results. It must also respond to the needs of its students and community by taking middle school practices and principles and making them fit the community, staff, and students. Doing so, the school walks a fine line between the community's beliefs about middle level learning and the school's defined beliefs.

Core and semi-core programming is another essential feature of Delta Lake School. This creates an opportunity for teachers to connect with students on a long term basis. Students are taught by fewer teachers and move from class to class less frequently. A flexible schedule makes subject integration more feasible and a flexible grouping of students helps the school meet their varied learning needs.

The teaming philosophy at Delta Lake is the key to the school's organizational structure. Teaming provides for teacher collaboration and enables the school's stakeholders to participate in the decision-making process. Involving parents and students in the operation of the school has meant that the school is more than just a building: there is a sense of ownership by the community and students.

Rosewood Middle School

Rosewood Middle School is located in the newest residential area in the southeast corner of a small urban community located in south-central Alberta. The town's population is about 5000. The community falls primarily within in the middle of the socio-economic range. Generally, the residents of the community are descendents of Western and Eastern European settlers.

The school presently houses about 370 students from grades five to seven. The staff consists of one principal, one vice-principal, eighteen teachers, four special education assistants, a computer lab assistant, a Preventative Programming Coordinator, two teacher assistants, two secretarial staff members, and three custodians.

The Facility

The school opened in 1992 and was designed specifically to meet the needs of early adolescents. The school foyer brings visitors to the large, open-ceiling libraries at the centre of the building. There are two loft-type classrooms located on either side of the library. The grade level learning communities branch out from the library to house the varied, non-traditional room configurations. Each wing has a multipurpose room. The school office is located on the left side of the foyer and contains a reception area, administration offices, a large conference room, a work room, staff lounge, storage and infirmary. Other school facilities include a two-station gymnasium with bleacher seating, an enhanced stage and back stage area, and a large tiered music room. There is an up-to-date Macintosh computer lab as well as computers and CD-Rom stations in the library and two other classrooms.

The school's physical environment accommodates and celebrates the school's students. The building colours are warm and calm. Hallway bulletin boards and glass cases display student projects, student artwork, school and student awards, and informational posters. The classrooms themselves are colourful and visually stimulating; all types of student work, learning posters and charts, lists of classroom rules, and student rights fill the walls. Classrooms also contain varied types of physical arrangements for students such as individual and groups of desks, tables, couches, extra carpets and floor pillows.

Becoming a Middle School

The primary catalysts for the new middle school were the parents in the community. The elementary school which housed students from kindergarten to grade six was overcrowded. The high school housed students from grades seven to twelve. Parents felt that the community was lacking a transitional program for students in between the elementary school and the high school. They also felt strongly about removing the grade seven's and possibly the grade eight's out from the high school which was located in the town's business area.

A new middle school had been recently built in a nearby town and the response to the middle school grade configuration and programs was positive. At the same time, Rosewood's principal, Donna Abbott, had just completed her master's degree and was ready to take a principalship. The community, the new principal, and the new staff researched the middle school concept and then worked together to design and plan the new middle school. Just before it was opened, the Alberta government announced a budget cut which would not permit the grade seven's from being included in the middle school. The parents lobbied the Department of Education for an additional building and were successful. Unfortunately, there is no space at the middle school for the grade eight students and the high school space is satisfactory. In the future, the community hopes that the middle school will be able to include grade eight students, as well.

The Rosewood Mission

Just before the school opened its doors in September 1992, the staff retreated to the town's college to focus on the "purpose - mission - the vision for the school" (Donna Abbott, principal of Rosewood Middle School). This process started with the sharing of beliefs, experiences, and concerns. In order to provide a focus for their task, they asked themselves the following questions:

1. What is an effective middle school?
2. Who are we as an organization?
3. What makes us unique or distinctive from other schools?
4. How should we response to our key stakeholders?
5. What is our philosophy?
6. What are our core values in serving our stakeholders?

These questions were also presented to the parent council at a meeting later that month. In October, the staff continued to examine their beliefs about middle schooling. Small staff and parent groups formed some tentative missions which a committee then merged into one statement that reflects the belief of the Rosewood learning community:

At Rosewood School, the goal is "to create a secure, challenging learning community that focuses on respect, cooperation, and belonging. This environment will enable us to develop an awareness of self and our obligations to the global community" (Rosewood Teacher Handbook and Planbook, 1996-97, front cover). Donna Abbott emphasized that at Rosewood, they are not "true believers," a term formulated by Thomas Sergiovanni. It refers to teachers and administrators who parrot their mission statement, but do not live by it.

In response to the community's initial wishes for opening the middle school, the school strives to help its students make the transition from elementary to high school in a "caring, supportive, and success-oriented environment" (Student Handbook, 1996-97, p. 1). The staff at the school embraces a child-centred philosophy: curriculum, teaching practices and other school programs focus on the developmental needs of the students. A key belief at the school is that parental involvement in all aspects of the school's

operation is vital. At Rosewood, the notion of community is the essence of their middle school philosophy.

The Learning Community

The "learning community" is central to all that happens at Rosewood school. It refers to more than grades five, six and seven. The learning community encompasses the home room and specialist teachers, the parents, the teaching assistants and the students of each grade level. In a "community," learning is a shared experience, rather than "something that is being delivered to kids" (Donna Abbott, Interview).

Every home room teacher in each learning community teaches language arts, math and another subject to their home room class. Another teacher in the same learning community teaches two other subjects. The result of this arrangement is that teachers and students within each learning community get to know each other well. Each learning community also has its own special education teacher and assistant. Creating a community where the students are taught by a core group of teachers provides a smooth transition from the elementary school, where students are taught by primarily one person, and the high school, where students are taught by several teachers.

The Timetable. Donna Abbott, the school's principal, calls the school timetable "the great enabler" because the manner in which it is organized allows the middle school programs to function. First and foremost, it allows the learning community concept to happen. Home room teachers are given two or more core subject allotments as blocks of time. These blocks are used flexibly to achieve curriculum goals; teachers can integrate subject areas and allot less or more time for certain subjects each week depending on instructional needs. French and physical education time is relatively high: at least four periods a week. In addition, the timetable ensures that the special education teachers and assistants can access the special education students in the classroom for adequate amounts of time. The timetable also provides time for an advisory period each morning. By aligning students in each learning community for speciality subjects, common planning time for learning community teams is achieved. Finally, fine arts programs, an important focus for the school, are blocked for the maximum time allowed.

Team Meetings. Each learning community team has a scheduled meeting during the school day once a week. The team leader plans the agenda for the meetings at which they plan curriculum and whole grade activities, share resources, and deal with school and grade level administrative matters. Some agenda items will also result in further meetings between all or a few learning community members. Being part of a team and sharing the workload has contributed to the cooperative and unified quality of the staff at Rosewood.

Integrated Special Education. All students, teachers and teaching assistants are considered a part of a learning community. As such, special education students are fully integrated into the classroom for their learning, with the exception of a small group of students at the grade five and six level who do not study French. At Rosewood, the majority of special education students have mild to moderate learning disabilities. The special education students are placed in two classrooms which also have fewer students than the other learning community classes. This makes them more accessible for support by the learning community staff.

A special education teacher and a teaching assistant are assigned to each learning community to help develop and deliver special programs for these students. The special education teachers support these students in their regular class approximately five periods a week and the assistants spend 15 periods a week in each classroom. The special education teachers' roles also include assisting teachers and administrators with student evaluation and placement, handling referrals from teachers of students who require testing, and completing in-school testing. Once students have been identified for special education programming, the special education teachers develop an Individual Educational Plan with other learning community staff members and then oversee the delivery of this program. They also provide consultation for classroom teachers for programming in other subject areas. Finally, the special education teachers complete the report card for the special education students and attend conferences with the parents and students.

Because students are integrated into the classroom, home room teachers also play a large role in the development and delivery of special education programs. They refer students in need of assistance to the special education teacher. They also assist in

providing an appropriate program for special education students, designing activities, and choosing and acquiring learning resources. The home room teachers also outline daily activities for the teaching assistants who work with the students. They evaluate the students, record progress and also communicate with parents of special education students regularly. The delivery of special education programs in the school is very much a team effort of the learning community.

Curriculum and Instruction

The staff at Rosewood believes that curriculum and instruction must be varied in order to accommodate the varied needs and interests of middle level students. Along with the core subjects of language arts, mathematics, social studies and science and physical education, students have the opportunity to develop their skills and talents in the fine arts areas. Grade five and six students also study French as a Second Language. When students reach grade seven, they are given some choices with respect to complementary courses. Skill development in the use of technology and learning resources is integrated into several curriculum areas.

Core Curriculum and Instruction. The planning and delivery of core curriculum begin with learning community teams. Teams work together to develop interdisciplinary studies, develop curriculum resources, and plan instructional activities. The differentiated learning program used in mathematics accommodates different learning styles and paces. Language arts teachers use such programs as the readers' and writers' workshop to individualize learning, tap personal interests, and accommodate ability levels. The science curriculum adopts a hands-on learning approach; students are involved in problem solving situations in which they design and perform tests. Students engage in enrichment activities in the classroom or are pulled out for short periods of time to work on individual projects with the vice principal or enrichment teaching assistant.

A walk through the hallways and classrooms at Rosewood shows flexible teaching and learning arrangements; students work at desks individually, at tables doing group work, or in other classrooms accessing technology or learning resources. Teachers are engaged in large group discussion or instruction, consult with small groups or hold conferences with

individual students. Throughout the school, there is evidence of accommodating students' diverse learning needs and interests.

Technology and Learning Resources. During the last few years, the school has increasingly focused on the use and integration of technology and learning resources in curriculum areas. Computers in the lab and in other areas in the school are actively used by all students in the school. The computer program is not considered a "dessert" in the school: it is an essential. Students acquire keyboarding skills, learn mapping skills, improve their FSL vocabulary, use the writing process to create language arts pieces, and prepare presentations and slides shows using the school's technology.

The school's library program is considered an "integral part of the total school program. . . providing for the educational needs of the entire school community" (Student Handbook, 1996-97). The teachers work closely with the library technician to plan and deliver programs that improve students' knowledge of learning resources and media. Specifically, these programs help students develop effective strategies for retrieving information, become more adept researchers, and become more knowledgeable in their use of information technology. A strong literature program is aimed at ensuring students become readers of good books. They expect that through a strong learning resources program, students can become effective life-long learners.

Speciality Subjects. All learning communities in the middle school are exposed to fine arts programs, although there are differences in program offerings between grades five/six and grade seven. Grade five and six students take both art and band or music. In grade seven, students choose two different complementary courses from the following: drama, band, French and media arts/visual art.

Both the elementary feeder school and Rosewood have a reputation for an outstanding band program and therefore most students choose band. At grade five and six students receive three periods of band per week and then four periods at the grade seven level. Most of the time, the band teacher sees students in small groups. The goal of the band program isn't competitive; at this level the emphasis is on participation, skill development, and appreciating music. For this reason, they do not tour in band competitions, but instead

showcase their music through community performances. Donna Abbott explains that rather than offering numerous exploratory programs, the school has focused on the fine arts, as these disciplines have been developed with much success and community support.

Extra-Curricular Activities

Providing middle school students an opportunity to explore personal interests is accomplished through extra-curricular activities. Once again, participation and non-competition are the key aspects of the intramural program, extra-curricular athletics and clubs. In the school's handbook on athletic programs, the following values are reinforced: honesty, integrity, respect for self, others and their beliefs, and respect for property. The term "Fair Play" is emphasized in a banner across the entrance to the gymnasium. Coaches of athletic teams accept all students who wish to play. Generally, the teams participate in exhibition games with other schools who embrace the same philosophy about extra-curricular athletics. Other extra-curricular activities are provided based on student interest and the availability of an adult supervisor. Some of the activities that have been made available to students include drama performances, choir, stage band, talent shows, an environment club, science fair, peer support, a running club, and a computer drop-in program.

Reporting Student Progress

The philosophy of student evaluation is consistent with curriculum and instructional practices. Teachers use a variety of methods when evaluating student progress: anecdotal records, checklists, formal/informal tests, oral and written responses, peer/self evaluations, projects, and teacher-student conferences.

Recently, the school was given permission from the district to develop its own middle school report card. The staff examined several report card formats from other middle schools and then took the features that would fit their school best. They are required to indicate student achievement through percentage marks for the core subjects and French, but also use checklists and comments for work habits and behavior. Performance in other subject areas is indicated solely through a checklist and comments. Thus far, the community has provided positive feedback on the new format.

Communicating student progress to parents is an ongoing, open process. Parent-student-teacher conferences are scheduled twice a year, but they have conferences whenever they are requested by parents or teachers.

The Advisory Program

As outlined in the Rosewood Middle School Student Handbook (1996-97) "the advisory program helps to bridge the gap between the elementary and high school by providing every student with an adult advisor and a peer group of fellow students." A formalized, structured advisory program at the school addresses the affective domain of middle schoolers: personal development, relationships with peers and adults, and self-esteem. It also emphasizes behaviours and attitudes that support the academic domain: goal-setting, responsibility for learning, organizational skills and cooperative communication.

Since the school's opening, the staff has spent considerable time and effort developing an advisory program that suits the needs of the students. This year there are two advisory group organizational structures. From Monday to Thursday, advisory groups comprise a mix of same grade students; on Friday, students meet in cross-graded advisory groups. The advisory groups meet with their advisor every morning for 25 minutes. All 18 teachers at Rosewood lead an advisory group which numbers about 20-22 students.

Advisory Curriculum. The same-grade advisory groups follow a curriculum that learning community teachers have developed together. The Alberta Health Curriculum provides a foundation for the advisory program which teachers then supplement with other goals, activities and materials. All advisors in each grade level teach the same unit at the same time; this promotes team sharing and cooperation and gives students a sense of being a part of the same program. There is also an allowance for discussion of student initiated topics that arise during advisory time. Some advisors set aside one period each week for personal advisement. During this time, advisors meet with individual students while the others read or work independently. The Friday multi-grade advisory groups follow the same school-wide themes. An advisory committee with representatives from each learning

community plans six-week units for the multi-grade program. Although each advisory works toward the same goal, there is some flexibility for advisors within each unit.

The Role of the Advisor. Successful advisory programs decentralize the role of guidance in the middle school. Advisors are not meant to be professional counsellors; their role is to supplement the advisement role of home room teachers and the guidance counsellor. Advisors at Rosewood Middle School are expected to provide a scheduled, planned and appropriate advisory program. An effective advisor is a "good listener, questioner, discussion leader, intervenor and guide" (An Advisory Handbook for teachers, p. 5). They are also flexible and encourage open communication between teachers and students and among students themselves.

The Impact of Advisory on Rosewood Middle School. After much hard work and planning, the staff at Rosewood School feel positive about the role and impact of the school's advisory program. Teachers find the opportunity to view students from a different perspective rewarding and believe that most students are interested in and enjoy the topics studied. They believe that socialization and personal growth are important in a middle school and that their program addresses these areas of development well. Donna Abbott believes that the new multi-grade advisory period has resulted in less conflict on the playground between the grades. Other teachers have observed that the grade seven students have become more encouraging and supportive of the grade five students since they introduced the multi-grade advisory this year. The Rosewood Advisory Handbook for Teacher emphasizes the importance of the advisory program in the school. "Middle years students need the sense of belonging that is enhanced by the security, recognition, achievement, and adventure associated with the philosophy of the Advisory Program" (p. 2).

The Preventative Program Coordinator

The role of guidance counselling at Rosewood is fulfilled by the Preventative Program Coordinator (PPC), which is a newly developed position in the school district. A trained social worker, her job is outside the scope of the teacher's skills and training. The PPC has three roles in the school:

1. Counselling individuals and families on issues so that students can learn;
2. Providing preventative programs such as stress programming for grade seven students, play therapy, mediation and dispute settlements, and organizing the school wide Health Fair and divorce counselling for children;
3. Working as a liaison and referral source to outside agencies such as Alberta Social Services and the Children's Hospital.

Students are generally referred to the PPC by parents, teachers, the administration, and outside agencies. After students are identified as requiring programming or counselling, the PPC establishes the appropriate intervention program. The PPC also handles peer conflict situations by beginning a peer mediation process and then working with teachers to continue the process in the classroom. She also helps with the school's advisory program by developing specialized units, such as this year's conflict units and then teaching them to advisory groups.

Rosewood's PPC believes that this type of guidance counselling position is ideal for middle schools because it is so closely aligned with the middle school philosophy and environment. Both place a strong emphasis on child development and the psycho-social issues that early adolescents face. Although they are not always trained or have the opportunity to counsel students, the teachers are committed to understanding and addressing these issues in their classrooms. Because emotional development is a priority at Rosewood, the roles of the PPC can be fulfilled more effectively.

Transitional Programs

Being a school "in the middle" has implications for the other schools in the system that house students who will be both entering and leaving the middle school. Providing a smooth transition for these two groups of students is an important job of the middle school.

Students at the grade four level have several opportunities to get acquainted with the middle school before they begin grade five. The activities begin with grade five students visiting the grade four students at the two feeder schools. Next, the grade fours visit Rosewood and are given a grade five "buddy" who leads them in an Easter activity. The

grade five buddies then write letters to their grade four buddies explaining the differences between the elementary school and Rosewood. In June, the grade four students come to Rosewood again for a half day of activities. At this time, they have an opportunity to question teachers. They also get a chance to participate in a music night with the other grades at Rosewood. Finally, both parents and students visit the school for an evening to meet with staff, administration and the school council and to tour the school.

The transition from grade seven to grade eight at the town's Junior/Senior High School is started as soon as students begin their education at Rosewood. The learning community concept, curriculum and instructional practices, and various school practices and programs gradually prepare them for grade eight. At the end of the school year, grade seven students are visited by the counsellor and administration from the high school. They explain the expectations of the school, provide the students with an orientation booklet, and respond to student questions and concerns. After this, the grade seven students visit the high school for activities and a barbeque. Finally, the high school holds an information night in June for grade seven students and their parents. In spite of these programs, the transition to the high school can be difficult for students because the approach is more traditional.

The Rosewood Staff

Donna Abbott declares that "the most important feature of any school is the people who inhabit it." From the beginning, the administrators and teachers at Rosewood were committed to learning about the middle school concept and translating it into programs and practices that would suit the learning communities in the school. Their philosophy about middle schooling, teaching background, and professional style allow the school to work towards their vision in a unified way.

The Administration. The principal and vice-principal of Rosewood School have adopted an administrative style that encourages and expects all members of the learning communities to be involved in leadership in the school. Despite this, there are specific responsibilities that are led and managed by the two administrators.

These responsibilities are both divided between and shared by the principal and vice-principal. Besides the responsibilities outlined in district policy, the principal manages professional development, school supervision and accreditation, community relations, the newsletters, the paraprofessionals, teaching and room assignments, class lists, substitute teachers, the library and also serves as a liaison to the PPC and outside agencies. The vice-principal is responsible for caretaking and maintenance, special education, teacher and student resource materials, equipment repairs, lockers, staff parking, standardized testing, student medical reports, security and also has the position of Advisory Coordinator. Both administrators share responsibility for the budget, staff selection, teacher supervision and evaluation, time tabling, discipline, attendance, advisory, and curriculum.

Donna Abbott sees a key role of hers as facilitating the "conceptualizing, articulating, and communicating" the vision of the school and "to keep calling into question whether the goals we pursue are aligned with the vision and to re-evaluate our purpose." The staff concurs that she actively articulates middle school philosophy through a variety of ongoing staff development practices. Her administrative style is highly collaborative and she is an open communicator. One teacher described her as straightforward and supportive: "She facilitates the people in the trenches. She gives you autonomy, but is still supportive."

Teaching Staff. Donna Abbott believes that the characteristics of the teachers at Rosewood are also "enablers": enabling participatory leadership to function, the mission to be sustained, reflection and professional development to be actively pursued, and the environment at the school to be warm and friendly.

The staff at Rosewood have been and continue to be chosen because of their interest in and enthusiasm for teaching middle school children. Most of the staff have an elementary generalist background and some expertise with middle level children, their developmental characteristics and needs. The staff are generally risk-takers, willing to try new approaches to benefit middle school learners. They are also pro-active, willing to do whatever is necessary to help students do their best. Teaching this age group also requires

flexibility, spontaneity, and an understanding nature that is also fair and consistent. Having a spirit of cooperation is essential at Rosewood because of the learning community concept. Finally, teachers at Rosewood are not only willing to grow and learn; they accept that growing and learning continuously is a natural process in the school's development.

Staff Development

At Rosewood, professional development on curriculum and middle schooling has been a way of life for the staff since the school's formation. Donna Abbott was instrumental in creating a culture that promotes reflection and personal reading.

Middle School Education. The creation of this culture began during the planning stages before the school opened. Donna Abbott provided the staff with a series of readings on middle school to prepare them for the process of creating the school's vision. Their opening year began with a staff retreat, a practice that has continued each September. During the second half of this first year, the school participated in a number of activities to further their knowledge on middle schooling. These included visiting other middle schools, attending conferences and workshops, bringing in speakers, and exploring middle school education through professional readings and staff discussions and planning.

Middle school staff development was the primary focus for the staff during these first four years as they worked to define the school's vision and refine educational programs. Although they have chosen to focus staff development activities on other areas, there is a need to revisit middle school philosophy when new staff members join the school. This year, the staff shared the school's history with its five new staff members at the September retreat and have acted as "middle school mentors" in order to help them understand middle schooling.

Other Professional Development Activities. During the last two school years, the staff has chosen to focus professional development activities on curriculum and technology. Last year, four teachers were involved in-servicing on the differentiated math program. This year, one of the teachers was given release time to then in-service other teachers on this program. They are also providing release time for the technology coordinator and the assistant to in-service learning communities on technology integration. Staff meetings are

generally reserved for professional development; presenting and discussing readings, engaging in teaming activities, and sharing knowledge acquired at conferences and workshops with other staff members. Professional development directions are closely tied into the school's goals.

School Goals

At Rosewood the process of change occurs continually; each year the staff, parents, and students reflect on the past year in order to set a direction for future restructuring. Students and parents are surveyed as to the strengths of the school and areas for improvement. Before restructuring, teachers detail the areas of the school that should be maintained, changed and explored. From these surveys and staff discussion, the school develops its Annual School Plan which includes overall school goals, learning community goals and special focus areas for the school year.

The following school goals have been established for the 1996-97 school year: (a) To focus education on what students need to learn and to ensure that high standards are established, communicated and achieved, (b) To enable greater parental/community involvement in education, (c) To improve teaching, and (d) ensure that the school is open to the public by publishing a column in the local newspaper and holding open school council meetings on a variety of topics. The special school goals, as articulated in the Annual School Plan this year are to refine the school's technology plan by reviewing the integration of technology with middle schooling and rto estructure the school information centre.

Strategies for Achieving Goals. The school hopes to achieve the first goal, focusing on what students need to learn, through several actions. Examining the grade six achievement results and then communicating them to parents will occur. This year, they also initiated a pull-out program for special education students during their regular French as a second language class. The "Building Dreams" program is aimed at improving student work ethic and social skills. It involves the following initiatives: positive reinforcement programs, increased parental involvement, the monitoring of student agendas, homework areas, a quiet room for students, social skills teaching, the multi-grade

advisory and increased PPC support to staff and community. The school also has worked on the enrichment program this year to better meet the needs of high achievers.

The second goal is aimed at increasing parental and community involvement at the school, an area that is already strong. Strategies to achieve this goal include expanding the role of parents on school committees and including parents in educational development activities. The school's third goal, improving teaching, is accomplished primarily through the activities already described in the section on staff development.

Special School Goals. The Rosewood School Education Plan describes one of the school's missions as striving to "create a learning community which is well versed in the use of learning resources". The Learning Resources Policy and Practice has two components: the Technology Plan and the Information Centre (Library) Plan. Both plans recognize that teacher education and accessibility to technology and resources is essential to ensure successful technology integration in student learning.

A technology steering committee has been formed to refine and oversee the implementation of the school's Technology Plan. The committee represents all stakeholders. The school's "Framework for Technology Integration in Education" outlines seven recommendations:

1. A five to one student to computer ratio over the three years of the plan.
2. Teacher access to computers at the classroom level and teacher support from the Student Tech Team, Computer Lab Tech and Coordinator.
3. Allocation of funds to release teachers, administration and support staff for in-servicing each year.
4. Participation in the districts' wide area and local area networks which will require the movement of existing hardware and software around the school and continual upgrading of hardware and software.
5. Providing technology support and maintenance.
6. Pursue business and community partnerships within the town and beyond.
7. Provide Internet Access and participate in the district efforts to increase Internet accessibility in the school.

The Information Centre Plan further defines the roles of the school library: to provide a holistic, cross-curricular perspective, specialized knowledge of learning resources and media and effective strategies for using information. It also formalizes the library's functions in program and instruction and resource management. This year, the plan is focusing on acquiring computer hardware and software that will enhance student literacy and expose students to information in "state-of-the-art formats" (Annual School Plan, 1996-97).

Participatory Leadership

From the school's beginning, Donna Abbott has communicated her belief that participatory leadership promotes "an enhancement of teacher authority and status and provides parents and students the opportunity to have meaningful input." Staff, parents, and students have opportunities to take on leadership roles on a variety of levels.

Input into the school's mission and organization was sought from parents and staff before the school opened and has continued each year. When the district introduced the concept of "site based decision-making" to its schools, Rosewood merely formalized practices that it had already been doing routinely and effectively. Now, parent and staff involvement in many school-related topics is encouraged, expected and is accomplished through such means as "memos, surveys, informal dialogue, committee work, sharing information and consultation" (Donna Abbott, school principal). Student leadership occurs through Peer Support, student committees that report to the principal, and intramural activities.

Almost all decision making, restructuring and school improvement is done through site-based action groups and committees. Members of these groups include representatives from each learning community. They cover such areas as intramural/athletics, advisory, social activities, environmental issues, peer support, site based management, technology/library, peer mediation, achievement tests, and differentiated learning. Members of the groups and committees report to staff through staff meetings or learning community team meetings. Learning community coordinators

also serve as liaisons between the teams and the administration. In essence, key elements of the school's decision-making model are good communication and good representation.

The Learning Community: Parents

From the beginning, the Rosewood staff has viewed its parents as equally important stakeholders in the education process and the operation of the school. Their involvement goes beyond attending school council meetings. Parents are an integral part of several aspects of the school: assisting and supporting learning at home and at the school, attending professional development activities, and contributing to school decision making through committee work and school council.

Parent Volunteers. The Parent Volunteer Program is well established to the point where they "seem to take care of whatever the school needs." (Brenda Hayworth, grade seven teacher). The parents of Rosewood contribute many volunteer hours to assist the school with such initiatives as building a new playground and organizing a hot lunch program. At the beginning of the year, a database of parents who are interested in volunteering at the school is developed by the Volunteer Coordinator, a parent volunteer. When staff members require a parent volunteer, they approach the Volunteer Coordinator who then contacts parents in the database.

Parent Education. All members of the learning community are considered learners. This includes parents. Parents often attend professional development workshops and meetings with the school staff. They played an important role in the organization of the first Alberta Middle School Association conference and continue to attend the conference each year. The school engages parents in middle school education by providing resources at the school for loan. Monthly newsletters contain excerpts from The Middle Years: A Parent's Handbook, a publication of the Saskatchewan Middle Years Association.

Parents have formal input into the school through two means: the school council and representation on site-based action groups. The Rosewood School Council's primary purpose is to support the staff, students and the school in several ways. They assist the school financially, helping to fund-raise for programs not covered by the school board.

The council brings in speakers and holds seminars to promote parent education. They also act as a liaison between the parent community and all levels of administration. This role enhances communication between the home and school so that parents are aware of the various ways they can be involved in the school.

Supporting Learning. Because the staff and parents at Rosewood have always worked in a spirit of cooperation, the parent community is generally very supportive and trusting of the staff. This occurs at the classroom level, also, where parent support in their child's learning is sought through signing student agendas, monitoring homework, or providing home learning opportunities. Through these school initiatives and programs, Rosewood has created an atmosphere where parent input and involvement is not just encouraged but considered essential.

Connecting to the Larger Community

Brenda Hayworth, a learning community seven teacher, likens Rosewood to a community school - the centre of the community, where everything happens. Being in a small community allows this to happen more naturally.

Members of the community are invited to participate in several school activities and events. The grade six students organize a Seniors' Day in which seniors in the community are invited to the school for a tea. The students tour them through the school and then conduct interviews with them. Students are also connected with the town's Horizon School, a school for the mentally handicapped and local service clubs. Students go out to the community for field trips and to participate in local events. Band concerts, presentations, Remembrance Day ceremonies, family dances, and sporting events also bring large numbers of the community into the school throughout the year. Having a positive relationship with the larger community has been another reason why Rosewood is so highly supported.

School Climate

By bringing together staff members, parents, and students in learning communities, Rosewood has tried to create a climate of cooperation and collaboration. All that has evolved at Rosewood since its inception has been directed at maintaining this climate.

People and Programs

The school addresses social and personal development domains in order to help students feel good about themselves. This is accomplished through the cooperative efforts of its advisory program, home room teachers, and Preventative Programming Coordinator. "Middle years students need the sense of belonging that is enhanced by the security, recognition, achievement and adventure associated with the philosophy of the Advisory Program" (Rosewood Middle School Student Handbook, 1996-97). The strong home room structure and core teaching ensures that teachers know students individually, placing them in an ideal guidance role. The Preventative Programming Counsellor enhances the climate of the school through social skills programs and personal counselling.

Donna Abbott contends that "it's all the little things that you do in a school" that contribute to a positive school climate. She refers to assemblies that recognize achievement, the cross-graded activities, the band concerts, the school song, intramural; all of the spirit-lifting programs and activities make Rosewood pleasant for its inhabitants. She also attributes the positive school climate to the practice of resolving problems and issues cooperatively. Giving students ownership of problems encourages them participate in the solutions. When this occurs, they are much more satisfied with the outcome.

School Discipline. The parents, students, and staff have worked together over the past few years to develop discipline philosophy and practices that will also ensure a positive school climate. The resulting policy is based on the following beliefs about discipline:

1. Dignity, respect and safety of all members of the learning community must be maintained.
2. Self-direction cooperation modelling and awareness of personal choices and consequences are promoted.
3. Individual rights and responsibilities are balanced with the learning community's welfare.
4. Discipline is an educational process, developing from direction and integration, to learned behaviour and action.
5. Discipline requires a balanced approach of consistency and flexibility.

6. Intervention should be early and at the most immediate level.

7. Participation and ownership in the process is promoted.

8. Communication between the members of the learning community is key.

Like everything in the school, the learning community is at the heart of the discipline policy. All members of the learning community play an important role in upholding the policy's beliefs and to develop a "Spirit of Cooperation", as referred to in the Rosewood Middle School Student Handbook (1996-97).

Student responsibility and development of self-discipline have always been a focus area at Rosewood. The discipline philosophy clearly outlines eight rights and responsibilities of students at Rosewood School. These are related to the following areas: work habits, the treatment of others, respect for others and property, safety, self-expression, and learning. Rights are given to students as long as they fulfill the behavioural and learning responsibilities.

The other members of the learning community, the teachers, parents, support staff and the administrators have important roles teaching and helping student to fulfill their responsibilities. It is expected that parents will be aware of the school's expectations and support the child and the school when issues arise. Teachers are expected to be "firm, fair and free of anger and maintain student dignity" (Rosewood Middle School Student Handbook, 1996-97, p. 17). They are also expected to communicate classroom expectations to students and develop classroom rules with students. Teachers must also model appropriate behaviour, help students to develop a healthy self-esteem and develop action plans with students who have difficulty meeting classroom expectations. Advisors are also support people who can encourage and coach students with respect to academic and behavioural concerns. Finally, the school administrators support school discipline in several ways. While they encourage teachers to handle most discipline themselves, they assists teachers by consulting and handling more serious problems. They also listen to students and encourage them to be problem solvers. Most importantly, the school's administration upholds the school discipline philosophy's beliefs and expectations.

There is no sole program or stakeholder that creates the atmosphere at Rosewood School. It requires the cooperation and collaboration of all members of the learning communities.

Challenges and Issues

Pioneering and then sustaining the middle school concept at Rosewood has not occurred without difficulties. During the first few years, the school experienced several growing pains associated with bringing together the various stakeholders to create a common vision.

When the school opened in 1992, its staff had come from both elementary and secondary environments. There was diversity in beliefs, experiences, and education. Everyone had to learn, evolve and cooperate. Once the dream was built and the staff finally seemed to be heading in a common direction, new staff members would join the school and the process would have to be started all over again. Donna Abbott explains that "it is tough to make sure that you bring the staff along and make sure they understand the school." Senior high staff sometimes have a difficult time understanding the middle school students' motivation for behaving the way they do; they often think it is more intentional than it is. Ensuring all staff members are "developmentally responsive" has therefore been another challenge.

Donna Abbott also believes it is important to continue a process of self-examination as a staff or else it is easy to "get into a rut." However, this process is difficult for staff because the school is always in a state of change. Keeping up with the changes sometimes means that teachers never feel caught up. To cope, teachers have learned to be flexible; they go with the flow.

The nature of the middle school is very demanding. The work load for core teachers is heavy. Developing and maintaining relationships with kids takes energy and time. The students themselves are high energy and have demanding academic and behavioural needs. Having to focus on behavioural issues rather than on learning has been a source of frustration for teachers. The school must continually work on its discipline system; refining and improving its effectiveness. The vice-principal relates that maintaining your

sanity in a middle school is a big challenge. The massive coordination that must occur to ensure teaming opportunities happen has been one of his challenges at the school. The weekly scheduled meetings are not always enough time; often teachers have to meet at noon hour or during other times to compensate.

The advisory program has had its share of growing pains since it was initiated. Barry Matthews, the advisory coordinator, found it challenging at the outset to convince teachers that it is a valuable, legitimate program. The "Advisory Handbook for Teachers" describes the struggle to develop an advisory program:

> The first two years were very much a time of trial and effort, experimentation information gathering, and self-evaluation. It was a frustrating time for all staff as they tried to work out programs, gather materials, and avoid conflicting with the programs of other grades.

Currently, staff feedback on the advisory program is positive. Like all program development in a new school, this has been due to the efforts of a dedicated and a hard-working group of staff members.

Future Directions

Donna Abbott discussed the process of reflection that helps set the future directions for the school. Key questions in this process include: "What do we want to see five years from now? Ten years from now? What must we do today and tomorrow to be that way in ten years from now?"

As they look to the future, the staff at Rosewood has identified the areas which are in need of changing or improving. The technology focus is one that will continue for the next several years as the school steadily works towards its technology plan goals. The staff feels excited about the implications for learning as technology truly becomes integrated into curriculum. The advisory program is working well at the present time, however, the principal can see that at some point advisory could be integrated into the home room structure. She would like to see a more seamless day, not broken up by advisory or complementary subjects. Other teachers would like to see an expansion of the enrichment program which has been quite successful in allowing students to explore areas of strength and interests. Parents would also like to see more exploratory areas offered

through either the option courses or integrated into core curriculum. Finally, several members of the learning communities expressed the hope that Rosewood will some day also include a grade eight learning community. This would complete the transformation of middle years education in the community.

Success as a Middle School

The principal summarizes the most successful aspect of the school in the following words:

"We are a learning community of students, parents, teachers and support staff. We've done a lot of growing together. We try to be developmentally responsive to where the students are." Everything that is successful about Rosewood comes back to the learning community and being developmentally responsive.

The school climate, one of cooperation and collaboration, is evidenced at all levels: cooperative cross-graded activities, the building of the playground, athletic programs, site-based action groups and the learning community teamwork are but a few examples of this spirit. From the beginning the staff viewed the parent community as an integral part of the school and have enjoyed enthusiastic and generous community support ever since. A climate in which learning communities are always learning and improving education at Rosewood has been created. As one teacher noted, "If there is something you want to do at the school, generally you will get support from everyone."

A staff that is developmentally responsive has contributed positively to the learning experience for students. One parent noted this strength on a recent survey: "A very positive and supportive atmosphere which in turn provides an excellent learning base for kids. Teachers who are interested in students and are willing to go the extra mile for them. I really like how you are all geared toward this age group." Teachers emphasize the personal development of students. They engage students in decision-making, and give them a sense of ownership. Students have opportunities to learn in different way. The teachers work hard to meet the needs of the students.

Donna Abbott summarizes the importance of being developmentally responsive: "It doesn't matter if you have advisory, or intramural. . . all those things are important. . . the

enablers, but the most important thing is the whole notion of knowing who these kids are and trying to design the school and trying to be responsive to where they are at that particular time."

Silver Creek Middle School

Silver Creek Middle School is part of one of the oldest school systems in the province. Beginning as a one room school in 1887, the system has become a community of schools serving 1600 students from kindergarten to grade 12. The middle school is located in a suburban community near one of the province's large urban centres. Although the socio-economic range in the area is broad, most residents are in the middle to upper part of the economic spectrum. Most of the residents in the area work in the city. The school programs reflect the high level of education and achievement in the area.

The school population has increased steadily each year with the influx of new residents to the primarily acreage area. However, with the opening of a fourth school in the vicinity, the population has decreased slightly this year to 520 students. The staff includes one principal, two vice-principals, one Child Development Assistant, 25 teaching staff members, nine secretarial/school assistants and four custodians.

The Change to Middle School

In 1990, the school transformed from a junior high school with grades 7-9 to a middle school with grades 5-8. The impetus for this change was its principal, Scott Garrison, who had just returned from completing a master's degree in the United States. While there, he also investigated the middle school concept. The district embraced the middle school concept and began the process to change grade configurations throughout the district. At a public meeting in the Silver Creek area in May 1990, the district announced the transformation effective September 1990.

The Facility

At this time, the facility underwent a full-scale renovation in order to meet the needs of middle school students. Further expansions continued during the next five years. The school now enjoys bright, open, large instructional and student gathering areas. The

practical arts and fine arts facilities are well equipped and progressive. It boasts a fully networked up-to-date IBM computer lab and several mini-labs throughout the school. The large library area has an automated computer catalogue and several CD-ROM stations to assist students with research and acquisition of materials. There is a large forum area on the lower level for student gatherings, large group meetings, and instruction. A full cafeteria was also built with funds raised in the community. The external grounds have basketball courts, grassed outdoor volleyball courts and a track field. The front foyer welcomes students and visitors with large plants, an art gallery and life-size models of staff members constructed by art students. Hallways demonstrate student work, notices and awards.

The School's Mission

Since the school's transformation in 1990, the staff has worked to define its mission and driving philosophy about middle school education. The school's commitment to and responsibility for educating its students is one that is shared wholeheartedly with the community. The motto, "Learning for Life", reminds staff and students to "work to their potential and to fulfill personal aspirations." Three key concepts are articulated in the school's mission statement. These provide the foundation for all that goes on in the school. Firstly, students in the middle are in transition from elementary to high school and require an environment that guides them in their intellectual, social, emotional, moral and physical development. Secondly, there is a recognition that students have diverse needs and therefore learning programs and activities must be developed that are relevant to these needs. Finally, the school's mission is to also help students better understand themselves and others regardless of racial, ethnic, socii-economic or learning differences. Under the umbrella of this mission are nine goals that also provide direction for the school:

We endeavour to:

1. Enable students to develop positive self-esteem in a nurturing environment.
2. Encourage integration in a multi-cultural society.
3. Create a stimulating environment that challenges students to realize their full potential.

4. Provide students with the opportunity to develop social responsibility.

5. Stimulate an understanding of our global environment and the need to adapt to its changing conditions.

6. Ensure the acquisition of a basic curriculum

7. Provide an environment that encourages lifelong healthful living skills.

8. Facilitate a smooth transition between elementary and high school.

9. Develop and encourage parental and community involvement in school activities.

(Silver Creek Middle School Agenda, 1996-1997 p. 2)

The school's structure, programs, and operation reflect the school's mission statement and the other beliefs articulated in school literature and by staff. Therefore, a connection has been established between the various aspects of the school and these missions, goals and beliefs.

School Organization

Traditionally in Alberta, grades five and six have been considered elementary grades and grades seven and eight have been considered junior high grades. As such, there are differences with respect to subject areas offered and the time allotments for each subject. The school divides the school along these two grade groupings for organizational and subject purposes. However, considerable effort has been made to maintain some common themes for all grade levels. Self-containment occurs at all grade levels. Students are kept with as few teachers as possible and teachers are given large blocks of time to organize curriculum. Secondly, meeting individual learning needs in the regular classroom with some regrouping practices occurs at both the grade five/six level and the grade seven/eight level and is key to how students are grouped into classes and how the timetable is structured.

Self-Containment. Goal #8: We will endeavour to facilitate a smooth transition between elementary and high school.

The self-containment is most prevalent at grade five and then decreases slightly each grade. This provides a smooth transition between the previous and next levels of schooling. Grade five teachers have large blocks of time with their home room teacher: all

four-core subjects and sometimes other subjects. The teachers at both the grade five and six are level are given a large block of time to divide into subject areas as they wish. This provides considerable opportunity for subject integration. At the grade six level, students see one more teacher than in grade five but still have large blocks of core subject time with their home room teacher. At grades seven and eight the core subjects are divided into two subject groupings: Humanities (language arts/social studies) and Math/Science. This semi-core structure ensures that some self-containment occurs at the grade seven and eight level, but students do experience more class changes and teachers in preparation for high school.

This year, the grade seven teachers are experimenting with a podding arrangement. One class, in particular, has the same teacher for Math, Science and French. Three teachers who share two groups of students for the four subject areas also provide integrated resource support to students with learning difficulties. They work closely to integrate curriculum and plan for individual learning differences. The podding idea is one that the staff hopes to expand to the grade eight level in the future.

Grouping Students: Meeting Individual Needs. Mission Statement: Students have diverse needs and therefore learning programs and activities must be developed that are relevant to these needs.

At Silver Creek, they are believers in heterogeneous grouping, but they are also committed to meeting individual needs. Therefore, there are certain grouping and timetabling practices that must occur in order for special programs to operate.

Each grade has one or two resource-based classes; classes that contain students who have been identified as requiring an Individualized Educational Plan. This occurs so that the resource program teacher can more easily access the resource students both in the classroom and when they are pulled out during French class. The grade seven and eight resource-based classes also contain Track 2 (math enrichment) students and are scheduled for math classes concurrently as they are regrouped for their math program. At the grade seven and eight level, French Immersion students must be placed in one or two classes, depending on numbers, so that they may be regrouped concurrently for French

Enhancement classes. As a result of these grouping practices, some classes are less diversified with respect to student ability level.

Curriculum and Instruction

Goal #6: We endeavour to ensure the acquisition of a basic curriculum.

Curriculum areas provide a well-rounded education for students at the school. All students from grades five to eight take the following courses: language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, health and physical education, and French. However, there are several curricular differences between the two levels in the school.

At the grade five and six level, students enroll in either English or French immersion, depending on the route taken in their elementary years. Besides the four core subjects and health and physical education, English route students must study French as a Second language. Exceptions to this occur if students are receiving resource programming and their parents desire more time in language arts and/or mathematics instruction. French Immersion students receive all of their instruction in French except for English language arts in grade six and English language arts and music in grade five. All grade five and six students study art and music, as well. The grade five music program is a general music program. At the grade six level, students may opt for one of two music programs: 1) the general program which is a continuation of the grade five program, or 2) the instrumental program, which is a beginning band program. Because the grade five and six students are generally self-contained for their core subjects, there are considerable opportunities for teachers to integrate the disciplines.

At the grade seven and eight level, the four core subjects are taught by two teachers. The subjects are divided into Humanities and Math/ Science. Individual teachers or teams of teachers decide if and how the disciplines are integrated for instructional purposes. Graduates of the French Immersion program take Enhanced French while all remaining students take French as a Second Language. Resource students at the grade seven and eight level also may choose to opt out of French to further study language arts and/or mathematics. At the grade seven and eight level, students may also choose six complementary course modules each year, two each trimester. If Band is chosen, it must

be studied all year. The other modules fall under the following categories and are numerous: fine arts, practical arts, and environmental education. Japanese is also offered this year. Technology-related curriculum is offered within the practical arts modules and is also integrated into other subject area instruction throughout the year at all grade levels.

Environmental Education

Goal #5: We endeavour to stimulate an understanding of our global environment and the need to adapt to its changing conditions.

Through the school's environmental education programs, it is hoped that students will gain an appreciation of environmental issues. The programs vary depending on the grade level. At the grade five level, students have the opportunity to participate in an outdoor study in the East Kananaskis area. The outdoor study integrates the disciplines of science, social studies, language arts and environmental and community awareness. At the grade six level, all students attend a four-day outdoor school in the early spring. The activities are built around and integrate the language arts and science curricula. Students prepare for the outdoor school through precamp studies, apply their skills and knowledge at camp, and then return to the classroom for culminating activities. Select students at the grade seven and eight level participate in the Kananaskis Young Scientists program. Students participate in field and lab activities over two or three days to explore the adaptations made by plants, animals and humans to the winter season. Students at the grade seven and eight level may also further their environmental education through the various complementary courses offered at the school. At a school-wide level, the Destination Conservation program allows a group of eight students, two from each grade, to lead environmental activities within the school. These students have been trained to do energy audits, promote the 3 R (Recycle, Reuse and Renew) and raise other environmental issues at the school.

Instructional Strategies

Mission statement: Students have diverse needs and therefore learning programs and activities must be developed that are relevant to these needs.

Goal #8: We endeavour to facilitate a smooth transition between elementary and high school.

An example of how philosophy and school goals translate into action is the process in which students learn curriculum. What happens at the classroom level acknowledges that the needs of middle level learners are unique and diverse.

Teaching to a variety of levels and learning styles is a strong element of program planning for Silver Creek's teachers. Self-containment and the semi-core program ensure that teachers see their students often and know them well. As a result, they are better able to provide support to and modifications for students with varied learning needs.

Generally, teachers recognize the need to still be child-centred at the middle school level. The role of teachers is one of coach and facilitator of learning; they tend to provide learning situations rather than teach material. The Humanities teachers at Silver Creek have collaborated on providing a consistent program throughout the grades. Teachers utilize a process approach to reading and writing. Quite often, students are given choices with respect to reading material and topics or formats for writing. Student/teacher conferences, peer conferences, whole class discussion, and individual or small group projects are some of the instructional arrangements that occur throughout the school's humanities programs. Mathematics and science programs also embrace a hands-on, active learning approach. Students acquire abstract mathematical concept by working first with concrete learning tasks. The scientific process is used to understand concepts; as much as possible, students have opportunities to generate and test hypotheses in a laboratory setting. In the content disciplines it is common to see students engaged in a wide variety of learning activities such as: scripting and producing videos, to writing and presenting radio plays, to designing buildings, constructing bridges, to working in learning centres, presenting student written poetry, drawing wall maps, and responding to music through visual arts. At all times during the day, it is common to see considerable variety in not only the activities students are involved in, but grouping arrangements, locations in the school, and use of resources and technology. Active, engaged learning is more than just an educational term listed in the school philosophy.

Assessment of student progress also reflects the diverse and unique needs of middle level students and is consistent with the instructional strategies in the classroom. The school's policy on student evaluation is described in the Silver Creek Middle School brochure (1996) as the following: "Student progress will be continuously evaluated by teachers using a variety of informal and formal methods all the while keeping in mind the diverse and transitional nature of the middle level child. For assessments where knowledge and skills are tested, both teachers and students engage in describing and developing performance criteria and standards."

All teachers inform students of their evaluation procedures at the beginning of the term. Evaluation is an ongoing process that involves a great variety of assessment methods such as teacher-developed checklists, self-evaluations, anecdotal comments, and oral and written responses, tests, projects and teacher-student conferences. Considerable work has been done by teachers in subject and grade level teams to develop both criteria and assessment tools which translate to the report card and portfolio.

The Collaborative Conference

Goal #9: We endeavour to develop and encourage parental and community involvement in school activities.

At Silver Creek, the staff and the community are continually examining better ways to report student progress and as such, "reporting student progress is ever-changing" (Silver Creek Middle School Brochure, 1996). Formal report cards and parent teacher conferences occur three times during the school year. The report card provides feedback for each subject in four ways: (a) an overall achievement mark, (b) an overall effort mark, (c) scales indicating how designated subject components are being achieved and most importantly (d) the collaborative conference involving parents, teachers and students.

The introduction of the collaborative conference has marked the elimination of anecdotal comments on the report card. In its place there is a portfolio that includes: curriculum newsletters, self-reflection letters from the child and parents that also include goal setting, and samples of student work. The portfolio is the centre of the conference which is fifteen minutes in length and involves the teacher or teacher teams, parents and

student. Thus far, parent involvement in this process has been strong and feedback positive.

Inclusive Education

Goal #3: We endeavour to create a stimulating environment that challenges students to realize their full potential.

Mission Statement: Students have diverse needs and therefore learning programs and activities must be developed that are relevant to these needs.

Inclusive education has been designated as a school goal for the 1996-97 school year, and as such major developments to school programs have been undertaken through the work of the inclusive education committee. Inclusive education refers to those programs developed for students with special learning needs, whether severe or moderately learning disabled, or gifted and talented. Wherever possible, the staff works to deliver these programs within the regular classroom setting. Inclusive education in the school is directed by its resource team which comprise regular classroom teachers whose teaching responsibilities also include sharing the resource programming, the child development assistant, the intensive resource program teacher, and two enrichment coordinators.

Resource Programs. There are two types of resource programs in the school: regular resource and intensive resource. Both regular and intensive resource programs require the development of an Individual Program Plan (IPP). This document is written in collaboration with regular classroom teachers, parents, the student and the resource teacher. For both programs the resource teacher works with the students in the regular classroom as much as possible, providing support for students, making curriculum modifications, and providing individual instruction.

Regular resource students are those who have been identified by the school's student services team as requiring individual or small group assistance as well as significant program differentiation over and above classroom modifications. The majority of the student's instruction takes place within the classroom, although most resource students receive additional small group instruction in lieu of French.

Intensive resource students have been diagnosed with a handicapping condition or a severe learning disability. This condition may warrant a special needs assistant in addition to the support of the intensive resource teacher. In all cases, significant modifications to most areas of the curriculum are required. These students usually opt out of the French as a second language program, receiving additional small group instruction from the intensive resource teacher.

Gifted and Talented Programming. Over the last two or three years, the gifted and talented programming has become more focused on providing enrichment opportunities for gifted and talented students in the regular classroom, providing enrichment opportunities for all students, the identification and IPP development processes, and the grade seven and eight math enrichment program (Track II Math Program).

The two enrichment coordinators, one for the grade 5/6 level and one for the grade 7/8 level, are responsible for all facets of the enrichment programming in the school. They provide teacher consultation on resources, literature, planning and monitoring in-class enrichment. They coordinate grade level projects such as the Kananaskis Young Scientist program, Invent-An-alien, and the artifact boxes. The coordinators also facilitate student access to academic contests, competitions, and fairs. In consultation with the subject teachers, the coordinators write IPPs, provide mentorships, facilitate selection of independent projects, and monitor the progress of gifted and talented students. The grade seven and eight enrichment coordinator also assists with the process of identifying the Track II math students. Once identified, these students are regrouped during their regular math class to receive an accelerated and enriched math program. The principal delivers this program. Except for the Track II Math Program, enrichment is generally inclusive.

Connecting Student with Adults

Goal #1: We endeavour to enable students to develop positive self-esteem in a nurturing environment.

Providing opportunities for students to connect with one or more adults in the school in a meaningful way has been an evolutionary process since the school opened as a middle school. When the school opened, a structured advisory program was established.

Students met in cross-graded groups with a "teacher advisor" each morning for twenty minutes. Within a few years, advisory was rescheduled to every Wednesday for one period before lunch. Eventually, the program was eliminated due to staff concerns about the program's value.

Presently, the school works to achieve the goals of advisory through other programs and structures. The key teacher arrangement provides considerable time and opportunities for students to connect with one teacher. Teachers get to know their students well. As such, issues concerning academics, organization, behavior, peer relations, and personal life are often addressed with the key teacher. An opportunity has been provided at the end of the day for key teachers to meet with their instructional groups to discuss homework, check student agendas, give class messages, distribute memos and discuss issues.

Opportunities for students to raise questions or concerns to teaching staff occur in two ways. The principal encourages key teachers to interrupt instruction for advisory time when the need arises. Many teachers regularly conduct class meetings to discuss and resolve problems. Secondly, monthly grade meetings are held in the forum area in order to address questions from students. Team leaders, grade teachers, and administrators conduct these.

An important aspect of the formal advisory program was to improve relations and understanding between students of different grades. Since the program was dismantled, both planned and spontaneous cross-graded activities occur throughout the year. Students also eat in cross-graded groupings; grades five/seven and grades six/eight have lunch in the cafeteria at the same time.

Student Support

Goal #1: We endeavour to enable students to develop positive self-esteem in a nurturing environment.

Several groups or individuals in the school support the students at Silver Creek. Informally, administrators, teachers and peers provide home-based guidance to students daily. More formalized support can be sought from the peer support team and/or the Child Development Assistant, or CDA.

The CDA provides academic advising, personal guidance, and crisis intervention services to individual students in need. Students make appointments with the CDA directly or are referred by a parent, teacher, or friend. The CDA also offers workshops to groups of students or classes on such adolescent concerns as peer relationships, socialization skills, anger management, conflict resolution and self-esteem. This year, the CDA played a large role in implementing a school-wide anti-bullying and harassment program. The CDA also serves as liaison to outside social agencies.

Another important role of the CDA is to lead the peer support program. Students from each grade are chosen and trained to provide emotional, social, and academic support to other students and to enhance informal student communication. Peer helpers are also involved in the planning and implementation of programs that have an impact on the school community. This year, for example, the peer support team presented a role-play on bullying and harassment at the school divisions professional development session. The peer support program plays an important role in "encouraging the development of a positive identity and responsible independence in youth" (Silver Creek Middle School Agenda, 1996, p. 5).

Extra-curricular Activities

Generally, co- and extra-curricular activities in the school are consistent with the transitional nature of its students. The school has several extra-curricular clubs, athletic teams, and music groups. Noon hour intramural activities involve students in traditional sports, special event, novelty-type, individual, and team activities. However, the emphasis is on participation and enjoyment, rather than competition.

The extra-curricular sports program includes the four major sports of volleyball, basketball, badminton, and track and field. At the grade five, six and seven level the emphasis is solely on participation, skill development and fun. The school forms as many teams as student numbers warrant. At the grade eight level, extra-curricular sports are more competitive in nature because the district league at this level allows for only a limited number of teams per school. Students may also join one of the several

extra-curricular bands offered by the school's band teacher. These bands are open to all students who wish to participate.

Transitional Programs

As Silver Creek Middle School, its feeder school, Westview and its receiving school, Silver Creek High School form a community of schools in the area. The three schools are well connected through their close proximity and their coordinated efforts to ensure that the students in the community move through the three schools with minimal disruption.

The grade five teachers at Silver Creek work closely with the grade four teachers at Westview to introduce the grade four students to the middle school. In late spring, the grade four students visit the middle school. Each student shadows a grade five student through the various classes. They do activities together such as practising opening and closing activities. They also have an opportunity to talk informally, to tour the school and eat lunch in the cafeteria together. The pair meet again at the elementary school for more activities. Through these programs, it is hoped that when the grade four students come to the school, they will have acquired an older "mentor" who can further assist them when they enter grade five. In addition, a parent orientation night is also held in late spring to discuss resource and enrichment, a typical day in grade five, the discipline cycle and the differences between the middle school and the elementary school.

A more difficult transition occurs between grade eight and nine, however, the staff at both schools work to make it as smooth as possible. In late May, the principal and counsellor from the high school visit Silver Creek to introduce them to high school. Programming is the main focus at this time and the grade eight students complete forms to choose their grade nine options.

The grade eight students attend the high school for a half-day orientation session. Staff and students from the high school speak to the grade eight students about various aspects of high school and then they also tour the school. The grade seven and eight teachers also meet with some of the high school teachers to improve the consistency between grades with respect to homework responsibility. Further meetings are planned to

continue improving the consistency between aspects of grade eight and grade nine so that students will find the move to high school less difficult.

The Silver Creek Staff

Neither the school's mission statement nor its goals are directed at its staff: rather, it is an important underlying assumption that the qualities and work of the staff enable the school's mission and goals to become a reality.

The Administration. The administrative team comprises the principal, the grade five and six vice principal and the grade seven and eight vice principal. Besides being responsible for two grade levels, the vice-principals have other school-wide responsibilities such as bussing, the budget, and the timetable. All three administrators have a teaching role in the school, as well. The administrative team is also involved with grade teams, curriculum planning and the discipline cycle.

A strong visionary leader, Scott Garrison is clear about his beliefs about middle level education and communicates it to the staff and community through everything that goes in the school. One grade eight teacher described the school administration as very accessible to and supportive of its teachers. Being open to innovations that are rooted at the team and individual teacher level is another characteristic of the school's administration.

Teaching Staff. The characteristics of Silver Creek's teachers are also central to its climate. Those teachers who fit best into the school and that choose to remain in the middle school environment share certain characteristics.

Lauren Benson, the grade seven team leader, describes having "kid sense" as being the most important quality. Having a sense of what the middle level is all about; understanding the needs and characteristics of middle level kids helps you to develop successful programs and to provide the guidance and interaction that the students need. It is essential to be flexible to the needs of the students as well as forgiving of the developmental changes that can often make interaction with adolescents challenging. She adds that "you must love this age group, or they will drive you nuts." The principal also believes that a desire to be connected to middle level students is crucial for success in a

middle school. "The teachers who are the most successful at the middle school are those who will take the time to sit down with kids at lunch hour, talk to them in the hallway, anticipate some of their mood swings."

The desire to be collegial and collaborative with other teachers is also a common characteristic among middle school teachers. Middle school teachers are generally willing to share their expertise with others as a means of growing and learning. Because the school is always evolving, teachers must be flexible to change and growth. Continuous learning through informal and formal professional development is valued and encouraged by the school's leaders. This year, the entire staff was involved in hosting the Alberta Middle School conference. Professional development funds were also used for the collaborative conference, inclusive education and the respect and responsibility committee.

Teacher Teaming

The functions and impact of the interdisciplinary teams at Silver Creek have increased steadily since it became a middle school. During the 1995-96 school year, one of the school's goals was to enhance opportunities for the continued development of teaming. The goal's action plan was aimed at facilitating teacher collaboration in the timetable and through weekly morning meetings. Professional development funds were also allocated for exploring new ideas for teaming through literature and conferences and providing release time for teachers to plan together. Each grade team has a designated team leader. The team leader facilitates the team meetings, provides a communication link between teachers and the administration, and assists new team members with school procedures. Interdisciplinary team meetings are scheduled every Thursday morning before school and once a week during school time. During these meetings, there are opportunities for planning units, field trips and special events, sharing resources and ideas, developing curriculum standards and evaluation procedures, discussing of students, and providing input into team and school decisions.

This year, the grade seven team expanded considerably the concept of teaming. Four of the five grade seven classes are in one geographical area. Planning time has been

provided in the timetable for the group of four teachers and the special education assistant to meet on a regular basis. At the grade seven level, the resource teachers are also core teachers. This has allowed them to identify the learning needs of the resource students and then team plan for those students in the four disciplines. They have also planned and implemented a thematic unit that integrates the disciplines of language arts, science and math. All of the teachers were involved in evaluating the students' culminating projects.

The collaborative conferences have also increased teacher collaboration, particularly at the grade seven and eight level where students have more teachers. Teachers worked together on student report cards and then met to prepare for the collaborative conferences. Although it was not a specified goal this year, considerable developments in interdisciplinary teaming occurred.

The grade level teams are also the key structure for decision-making in the school. Through team meetings, team leaders initiate issues or areas that need to be resolved. After discussion at the team level, the leaders bring forth the team's direction to the administration. These issues may also be presented again at staff meetings where a final discussion and is made. When a decision cannot be made, a committee is formed to further examine the issue. The issue is again brought to staff. Eventually, a decision is made that the majority can be comfortable with. Although the staff may not always be involved in the final decision-making, they are always involved in setting the school's direction.

School Goals

Professional development activities at the school are also directly linked to the goals that the school has established for the 1996-97 year. These include: respect and responsibility, inclusive education, technology and the collaborative plan, which has already been described.

Respect and Responsibility. Goal: To involve students, staff and parents in creating a community which values such things as honesty, sensitivity, tolerance, and kindness and helps students choose behaviours which reflect these values. (Silver Creek Middle School Education Plan - 1996-97, Section F - Page 1).

The above goal has been a school focus since 1992, when a committee was struck to revise the behavior modification plan to better reflect the needs of the middle school student body. This year, the school chose to address the internal motivation aspect of student behavior: issues such as anger management, conflict resolution and harassment and bullying. The first plan of action was to collect information on the topic: explore literature, visit other schools, attend workshops and training sessions, and provide professional seminars for teachers in the school. This prompted school-wide programs such as increased cross-graded and group activities, informal talks on bullying and harassment at all grade levels, and values education activities. Several theme days were organized to promote proactive social skills. The Child Development Assistant's programs on anger management, conflict resolution and socialization, and the work of the peer support group were additional ways in which the goal was achieved.

Technology. Goal: To establish a school technology plan that meets the needs of Silver Creek Middle School and enhances the education of the students (Silver Creek Middle School Education Plan - 1996-97, Section F - Page 1).

More specifically, the school hopes to improve student and teacher access to technology, increase teacher skills, and network the school to other schools. A committee of teachers and parents was established this year to produce a finalized plan by the end of the 1997 school term. This plan will set a direction for the technology in the school with a philosophy and mission statement. It will also include specific plans for the following: teacher access at the classroom level, hardware and network standards, teacher in service, technology support and upgrading, facilities upgrading, measures for monitoring and reporting results, business partnerships, connections to the Internet, and technology integration. In short, the plan will set the course for technology in the school in the future.

Inclusive Education. Goal: To continue to implement Rocky View School Division's framework for inclusive education (Silver Creek Middle School Education Plan - 1996-97, Section F - Page 1).

The inclusive education committee's first plan of action was to explore innovative timetabling structures so that collaborative planning and resource support for core teachers could be facilitated. Teacher in servicing on the characteristics of and teaching/learning strategies for special needs learners was also part of the plan. The committee also worked on communicating the roles and responsibilities of the resource team to staff and the community. Finally, the committee developed a collaborative consultation model for inclusive education in the school.

Respect and Responsibility

"We expect our students to develop the capacity for intelligent self-control and to respect conditions in the school that will ensure that effective learning will take place. We expect the cooperation and commitment of every student, staff member and parent to achieve standards of personal conduct and discipline at Silver Creek Middle School" (Silver Creek Middle School Brochure, 1996).

These expectations emphasize the importance of developing respect and responsibility in Silver Creek students. The Respect and Responsibility program has been a contributing factor in achieving a positive school climate at Silver Creek. Students are responsible for:

1. respecting authority of teachers and other student to enforce student discipline and moral conduct.
2. behaving in classrooms and on school campus in a manner that does not disrupt or interfere with the rights of other students and staff.
3. abiding by standards of conduct and rules and regulations governing discipline established by the school.
4. attending assigned classes daily, on time and for the full year.

(Silver Creek Middle School agenda, 1996, p. 8).

Students are also expected to exhibit good work habits. Specifically, this involves being prepared for class, being organized, using their personal agenda daily, and completing assigned homework. When students do not live up to their responsibilities, the discipline cycle is put into place. Teachers are responsible for dealing with most academic problems. Behavioural problems during instructional time may result in the student completing a Choices Form, in which a description of the incident and a student reflection

is required. Choice Forms are kept on record in the office and are also sent home to parents. When behavioural problems continue to occur, a parent/teacher/student conference is held. The administrators become involved at the last stage of the cycle. Behavioural problems during non-instructional time are handled by the Child Development Assistant or the administration. The Silver Creek staff has worked hard over the years to develop and refine its discipline cycle and they now feel that it is a successful way to ensure students learn to be responsible for their behaviour.

Community Connections

Goal #9. We endeavour to develop and encourage parental and community involvement in school activities.

Silver Creek is fortunate to have a very supportive, involved and ambitious parent community. As a result, the school is able to translate the above goal into action with great success through both its school council and parental involvement.

The Silver Creek Middle School brochure (1996) states that "The school council is a very fundamental and important part of this school." The Silver Creek Parent Advisory Council (PAC) serves as a liaison between the school and the community. All parents are members of the PAC and as such are invited to attend all meetings. Council executive consists of a chairperson, vice chairperson, secretary/treasurer, volunteer coordinators, school supplies coordinators, a band parent coordinator, French Immersion coordinators, a Silver Creek West Education Link (SWEL) liaison and grade and community representatives. The council plays an important role in providing input into decision-making in the school; all budgetary decisions are made through school council and any new school initiative is discussed at the council level.

Parents are considered to be an integral part of the school's operation through volunteerism and through programs, such as the collaborative conferences, that keep them involved in their children's schooling. There are over 150 volunteers that assist the Silver Creek staff. Parents are kept abreast of school activities and curriculum through regular news and curriculum letters. Special events such as band nights, the lip sync contest, and the writer's conference are successful in bringing the community into the school. The

large amount of parent expertise in the community is utilized by such programs as the noon hour sessions organized by the gifted and talented coordinator. An open door policy has been created in the school that encourages parents to call or speak to administrators or teachers whenever the need arises.

Because of its geographical isolation from the business community, community involvement is generally limited to parents and other residents in the community and student service is more internal. The school does depend on the larger business community for program support. AMOCO, for example, provides funding for materials and teacher or parent training on hands-on science activities for students.

Challenges and Issues

The transformation from junior high school to middle school is ever evolving. As such, the school must continuously grapple with the challenges associated with change.

The Staff in a Middle School. Just as the staff at Silver Creek is key to its success, so can it also be the source of its challenges. Reconciling individual teacher needs and beliefs about teaching with the vision of the school is extremely difficult. Some teachers would like to see a multi-year progression at the grade seven and eight level, but other teachers feel comfortable at a particular grade level. Some teachers would like to teach their own options; however, the specialist options teachers have placed a great deal of time and effort into developing their programs and are reluctant to give them up.

When the school opened as a middle school, its staff started fresh; a common vision was developed during its inception through in-servicing and collaborative planning. Now that the school is established, keeping these teachers, as well as new ones, enthusiastic about middle school ideals and practices is another challenge. The leaders must continuously work to keep the staff motivated and learning in an environment that demands much of them.

The success of the programs depends on its teachers. Lauren Benson aptly states that "You can have millions of dollars of technology...millions of dollars of architecture...but if do you not have the people delivering what needs to be delivered to those kids, it will not be successful." Without a formalized advisory program, it is difficult to monitor whether

the worthwhile goals of an advisory program are being met. The seamless advisory, addressing student concerns, issues and providing support to students as they arise in the classroom, requires a staff that is as committed to the social aspect of teaching as it is to the academic aspect.

Hard Work. Scott Garrison believes that the middle school philosophy is harder to keep going than the junior high concept. Practice such as authentic assessment, inclusive education, collaborative conferences, interdisciplinary teaming, and a no-cut sports team policy require more from the staff than the traditional junior high teaching practices. The number of committees formed to address changing practices and school improvements has increased. "There is something about this middle school thing that seems to be more work. I think it is worth it, but it's more work" (Scott Garrison, Silver Creek Middle School). Other teachers concur that the curriculum and instructional practices at the middle school require great energy.

Future Directions

The future at Silver Creek Middle School is in part articulated in its school education plan. Its three goals: technology, inclusive education and respect and responsibility also set specific directions for the next school year. Programs and initiatives such as the grade seven podding arrangement and the collaborative plan are also areas that the school would like to expand on in future years.

The document, "Through the Looking Glass: The Future of Middle Level Education" (Williamson and Johnston, 1996), has given the principal of Silver Creek, Scott Garrison, much food for thought. The notion of the learning community has been realized by the grade seven podding arrangement. Allowing teachers to only teach grade seven in order that they may create their own timetable, plan and deliver interdisciplinary units and create personalized programs for a specific group of students is an ideal interpretation of the learning community for Silver Creek's leader. In the future, he hopes to expand the learning community to other grades. The collaborative conferences are only a beginning in an effort to further engage parents in the learning process. As Scott enthusiastically notes, "We want to see how far a school can take it (active parent participation)." In

addition, adult-student relationships, is another area that Scott Garrison would like to improve upon in the future. Although the school is not looking to bring back a formalized advisory program, he feels that the school is lacking something to replace advisory. It is all part of bringing the school's reality closer to the ideals set out in the mission statement and its goals.

Keys to the School's Success

Since its transformation from junior high school to middle school, dramatic improvements have been noted in student attendance and school climate. The parent community is supportive of the school programs and the educational results are positive. Several factors are believed to have contributed to this success. The staff at Silver Creek is key. Secondly, the school's philosophy and mission statement are specifically "developmentally appropriate" for middle level kids. The mission statement and the school's goals are successfully translated into the curricular, social, behavioural and extra-curricular programs. Another key to the school's success is its promotion of innovation and change. Finally the school's ability to engage its parents has ensured that strong community support for the school.

People are Key. As Lauren Benson points out, "It is the adults that are working under the surface to ensure a positive atmosphere." The success starts with an administrative team with a strong middle school vision. This middle school vision is then built with teachers who are geared to teaching practices that fit middle level development: child-centred, progressive, and innovative. They want to teach middle level kids; and for the most part, enjoy interacting with this age level. Scott Garrison believes strongly that when the classroom practices meet their needs, students are happy. When students are happy, they look forward to coming to school. The entire staff at Silver Creek has created an atmosphere where kids generally feel positive about their learning environment and when they do not, they know where to go for support and assistance.

Philosophy. It has taken time for the school to develop a philosophy of middle schooling that the staff and community believes in enough to translate into practice. The recognition of the transitional nature of kids in the middle, and the individual differences

that occur with developmental, social and academic issues permeates everything that goes on in the school. Scott reflects on how the school has changed since it became a middle school. "The biggest difference from when we were a junior high school was that we never stopped to realize who the audience was; we just did things the way we had always been doing them."

Programs. Once the people in a school embrace a philosophy, corresponding programs and structures unfold more smoothly. Student organization, the self-containment and semi-core program, allows teachers to meet their students' needs. Ensuring that staff and students have some autonomy into the teaching and learning process increases motivation for both parties. The forum meetings, teacher teams, and the collaborative plan are examples of programs that give teachers and students greater control and input. Other programs promote student esteem and contribute to a positive school climate. Spirit days, cross-graded activities, clubs and sports programs, exploratory programs, and enrichment programs tap into students' individual interests and their social nature. Programs such as the honour roll and the equally esteemed effort roll, specific student awards, and the year long Eagle Recognition Profiles recognize students for a wide variety of achievements. Every program and structure that has been developed in the school is consistent with Silver Creek's philosophy and mission.

Continuous Growth

At Silver Creek, there are no doors closed on innovation. Generally, the administration and teachers are supportive of new ideas that will improve the educational experience for all. Although continuous change is also challenging, it helps to ensure that the school sets goals and strives to achieve them each year. It also keeps them true to their mission.

Themes

The descriptions of the three schools represent three different constructions of the middle school concept. The circumstances surrounding each school's origin vary according to community demographics, parental demands, and district policy and

initiatives. Each school houses a different grade configuration and this impacts its programming. In addition, the schools are located in vastly different communities: a newer residential section of an urban centre, small town in a rural setting and upscale acreage community near an urban centre.

Overshadowing these differences are several common themes emerging from the descriptions. These themes serve to connect the schools and provide a portrait of an exemplary middle school in the Alberta context. The predominant theme among the three schools is their philosophy about middle school education. Striving to be "developmentally responsive" and to meet the unique and transitional needs of adolescents pervades everything that happens at the schools. From philosophy to school programs to classroom practices, the staff at each school is continually taking into account the nature of its students. At Delta Lake, "developmental responsiveness" means that students' differences are not only considered but celebrated. Teachers provide educational programming that is directed at meeting the varied needs within each classroom. The learning community model at Rosewood Middle School helps to ensure that students' needs are met through the colloborative efforts of regular and special education teachers and support staff. Silver Creek Middle School has worked to develop curriculum, instructional and assessment practices that are based on the unique learning needs of early adolescents. All three schools' organizational structures for learning, whether it be Delta Lake's key teacher arrangement, Rosewood's learning communities, or Silver Creek's self-containment of classes also allows for educational programming that is more personalized and more developmentally appropriate.

Another predominant theme is the cultivation of relationships between adults and students. Teachers are more than deliverers of content. Home-based guidance means that teachers are expected to be directly involved in providing support that goes beyond academics. Because they see their students often and for several disciplines, they are able to have a more profound impact on their students' academic, social, and emotional development. Whether it be through a structured advisory program or a key teacher arrangement, the teachers in these middle schools find themselves providing guidance and

support to their students as they move through their adolescent years. The teacher-advisor role is therefore much stronger in the middle school environment than in other schools for adolescents, particularly in circumstances where the teachers move through the grades with their students. Each school's guidance or counselling personnel also play a major role in ensuring that students receive the necessary support during the middle years.

From the administration level to the classroom level, these three schools have implemented a system of structures in which leadership is distributed throughout the school. The principal of Delta Lake middle school calls this "roving leadership." The administration has relinquished a considerable amount of the decision-making responsibility to other individuals within the school. Whether they are called leadership teams, site-based action groups, grade level teams, or committees, all staff members are involved in important decisions in such aspects of the school as curriculum and instruction, school programs, the budget, organizational arrangements for learning, school goals, and timetabling. In fact, teacher teams are given considerable autonomy for the programming at their grade; almost everything that goes on in the classroom is decided at the grade level. The decision-making process also engages parents and students at each school in areas that have been traditionally out of their realm of responsibility. The result of this shared leadership model is increased ownership, investment and ultimately support for what goes on in the schools.

Another theme that sets these middle schools apart from traditional models of adolescent education is the extent to which each school has created an atmosphere of continuous growth and learning. Each school has been in operation for at least five years, yet none of the schools have reached a period of settlement. Each year presents an opportunity for the staff to improve and refine their middle school programs and teaching practices. Staff members, individually and in teams or committees, constantly strive to maintain "developmental responsiveness."

Finally, the key theme of these schools, and the one that is most crucial to their success are the staff members. The principals have staffed their schools with teachers and support staff who are dedicated to adolescent education and who believe in the middle school

philosophy. Their special qualities ensure that programs not only operate, but make a difference in the educational experience of the students. No school program, no matter how developmentally responsive, can replace the value of a caring, supportive, and highly skilled staff.

Chapter 4

SUMMARY, REFLECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary of the Study

During the past eight years, the middle school concept has been gaining popularity in Alberta as an alternative to the junior high school model. The more established middle school movement in the United States has produced considerable research and literature on middle school philosophy and practice, however, because the middle school movement in Alberta is at an infancy stage, there is very little literature which addresses the middle school in the context of Alberta or even Canada. As a result, I chose to explore the meanings of "middle school" in Alberta. Within this study, the following research questions were examined:

1. What definitions of "middle school" are in use in the schools in this study?
2. How are crucial aspects of this definition implemented in these middle schools?
3. What issues are associated with these middle schools both at their inception and as they evolve?
4. What themes associated with middle schools arise from the data?

Three schools were selected for an interpretive inquiry into Alberta middle schools. Data collection included a formal interview with the principal and another staff member, school literature, informal discussions with staff members, and field notes based on school observations. The collected data formed the basis for three school descriptions and for the identification of themes.

The Schools

The three schools were selected through a nomination process utilized by two executive members of the Albert Middle School Association. All three schools have been established middle schools for at least five years. Delta Lake Middle School is located in a new residential community within large urban centre. It houses students from grades seven to nine. Its method of organizing students for learning and teacher/leadership teams is unique among the district's primarily traditional junior high school structures. Rosewood Middle School is located in a small town in an agricultural area of the province.

Its close ties to its community and learning communities of grades five to seven have garnered much support for the school. The third school, Silver Creek Middle School, is located in a primarily acreage community west of another large urban centre and provides a middle school education for students from grades five to eight. The innovative staff has worked hard to meet the individual needs of the students in the school which is enhanced by a spirit of collaboration among staff, parents and students. Although each school was unique in the manner in which it incorporated middle school concepts, the most prominent themes that emerged are shared by all three.

Middle School Themes

The pervasive theme that weaves its way through everything aspect of each school is articulated in its mission or school philosophy. Being "developmentally responsive", to provide programming that is consistent with the unique and transitional nature of early adolescents, is the primary aim of the three middle schools in the study. Each school's philosophy or mission statement reflects an aspiration to recognize and incorporate these needs within all aspects of the school. This philosophy is then reflected the classroom level: in curriculum and instruction. The creation of learning communities, self-containment or a key teacher arrangement as well as more formalized advising and guidance programs also recognize and address the many changes that students experience during the middle years.

Another important theme is the role that each school's staff play not only academics, but in the social-emotional aspect of their students' development. Because teachers spend so much time with their students, they naturally become well aware of their behaviours, attitudes, home life, interests, social interactions, and often personal problems. Home-based guidance is an expected teacher responsibility in these schools and it functions daily. In these three schools, adults and students develop relationships with each other so that students receive the support and guidance they need to deal with the often troubling changes that occur during adolescents. It is another important way that middle schools recognize and accommodate that adolescence is a unique stage of development and as such requires an appropriate educational response.

The organization of leadership in the three schools is another important aspect of being a middle school. It is consistent with the spirit of cooperation and collaboration that pervades the schools. All three school principals are in the words of one school principal "willing to entertain roving leadership." Site-based committees and other empowering school structures and practices provide the means through which the schools' philosophy of shared leadership operates.

Another pervasive theme is the extent to which the three schools are involved in a continuous process of reflection and improvement. This process has become the norm for the three middle schools, and as a result their mission is never complete; all three schools are constantly striving to keep the learning environment responsive to its students and community.

Finally, and perhaps the most essential ingredient to the creation and sustainment of a successful middle school is its staff. The qualities, experiences, and attitudes of its administrators, teachers and support staff are crucial to creating a climate where students feel supported, understood and successful.

Reflections on Themes

These five themes are key to the schools' success in middle schooling. It is difficult to isolate each theme for discussion purposes because they do not operate or function in isolation. John Lounsbury aptly states that "handicapping to the development of effective middle level schools are that most continue to view the middle school as a collection of separate components" (Lounsbury, 1991. p. 8). These three middle schools are effective because they are not a collection of separate components. The themes are closely interconnected. They work in harmony and are highly dependent on each other. For example, meaningful adult-student relationships are dependent on the qualities of the teachers. Continuous school renewal occurs through the shared leadership model; the teacher teams, committees, and action based groups are the driving forces behind fulfilment of the school goals. "Developmental responsiveness" could easily be woven into each theme since it drives not only classroom practice, but decisions at each level in the school and the schools' plans for change and improvement. It is the rationale for

providing an environment where teacher-student relationships are nurtured. It is also key to a successful middle school teacher.

This interconnected relationship means that throughout the proceeding discussion aspects of the themes will arise at various points. It also has implications for how middle schools must be viewed: a Gestaltist view in which the whole is much more than the sum of its parts.

Another connection is established in the proceeding piece. The themes identified emerged from the data collected at each school. Although I had become familiar with a wide array of middle school literature prior to visiting the schools, I deliberately did not try to impose a framework on the data to fit the findings of the literature. I was prepared to discover new themes or to discount middle school principles espoused by middle school authors. It is at this stage, after the themes have been identified, that connecting the findings to middle school literature occured.

Theme 1: Developmental Responsiveness

Joan Lipsitz (1984) introduced the term "developmental responsiveness" to refer to schools whose philosophy and practices were aligned with the developmental needs of early adolescents. Clark and Clark (1992) also emphasize the importance of middle schools to be developmentally responsive, particularly in an increasingly demanding society They stress that adolescence is a crucial time during which their educational experiences can be pivotal to the rest of their schooling years. From the school's philosophy to its organization of students for learning to classroom practices, a middle school should be an "educational response to the needs and characteristics of youngsters during early adolescence, and as such, deal with the full range of intellectual and developmental needs" (NMSA, 1982, p. 14).

Middle School Philosophy. This important middle school concept is shared by all the three schools and is in fact the underlying principle of each school's philosophy. Furthermore, Manning (1993) states that "prior to implementing developmentally appropriate school practices, schools should adopt core values that provide a blueprint for their practices" (p. 37). This blueprint, or philosophy, should reflect adolescent

development: the intellectual, social, emotional, moral, and physical characteristics and needs of young adolescents (NMSA, 1996).

In developing these mission statements and the associated core beliefs, it was important for the founding staff members to examine both middle school philosophy in literature and their own beliefs about middle schooling. At Delta Lake, the principal based the school's vision on the recommendations in The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Education's Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century and then worked together with a committee of staff and parents to define the Delta Lake philosophy. At Rosewood, the founding staff developed their mission and school philosophy through a process in which they connected middle school literature with their own beliefs and vision about their new school. Developing a mission statement has been an evolving process at Silver Creek, where its staff has engaged in much discussion and reflection to develop three essential beliefs about middle level education.

Naturally, the school's mission statements have been developed to reflect what each school believes is important in the education of middle level students. However, the underlying principle of each school's mission statement is "based on the characteristics and needs of developing adolescents" (Alexander and George, 1993, p. 44). At Delta Lake, there is a recognition that adolescents have unique academic, social, behavioural and physical needs and may demonstrate these at different developmental levels. Consequently, schooling for the middle years must reflect the needs of adolescents. The principal of Rosewood Middle School referred to the idea of being developmentally responsive when she described "responding to who they (middle school students) are and where they are in their stages of development" as key to the middle school philosophy. Helping students make the transition in a "caring, supportive, and success-oriented environment" that guides them through these developmental changes is specifically cited in the mission statement of Silver Creek Middle School and in the Student Handbook at Rosewood Middle School (1996-97, p. 1).

Braddock, Shu-Chang and McPartland (1988) emphasize that students in the ages covered by middle grades encompass distinctive biological, cognitive, and social

dimensions in human growth toward adulthood and do not adhere to the same rate of development for each change. The result is a student body that is a more varied and diverse group than any other school population. The second component of Silver Creek's mission statement refers to the diverse needs of middle level students and the need for learning programs and activities that are relevant to these needs. The staff at Delta Lake expressed their belief that all students are individuals and should be encouraged to demonstrate their learning in diverse ways. They believe in celebrating differences and uniqueness in order to help students succeed.

In articulating their philosophy and beliefs, the three middle schools have placed the notion of "developmental responsiveness" at the forefront: the foundation for school programs and practices. The terms "unique" and "transitional" are also important aspects of the philosophies at the schools. These two terms also form the basis for George and Alexander's (1993) characteristics of exemplary middle schools. However, what is more important than the inclusion of the term "developmental responsiveness" in a middle school statement is what actually happens within the school walls: whether their mission translates to practice.

The Creation of Communities for Learning. The creation of communities for learning is what the principal of Rosewood Middle School labels an "enabler." It is an organizational structure for student learning that enables teachers to successfully focus on the individual needs of their students; to provide educational programming that is "developmentally responsive."

Since the late 1980's, the term "community" has been used frequently in middle school literature to describe a philosophy and system for organization in the middle school. The influential reform document, Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century places creating "small communities for learning" first on its list of eight recommendations (Black, 1995). In "Through the Looking Glass: The Future of Middle Level Education" (1996) Williamson and Johnston state that "Responsive middle level schools focus their energy and resources on developing effective learning communities" (p. 2). Within learning communities or interdisciplinary teams teachers share students,

space, and schedule (George and Alexander, 1993). Adults and students are committed to meaningful collaborative work to create a personalized learning environment. Learning communities strengthen students' commitment to school as they create a sense of belonging and enhance student engagement in learning.

All three schools have embraced the basic concept of the learning community and interpreted it in three unique ways. At Delta Lake Middle School, the term "family model" refers to the key teacher arrangement that provides students with a consistent group of peers and teacher with which they progress through each grade. Teacher teams at each grade level are also part of the family model. At Rosewood Middle School, the "learning community" is central to all that happens in the school, encompassing the home room and specialist teachers, teaching assistants, students and parents of each grade level. Silver Creek Middle School has also striven for as much self-containment as possible, limiting the number of teachers each student deals with at each grade level. Recently, they are embracing the learning community concept through "podding": groups of same grade teachers who share students, curriculum and instruction, and schedule. The labels vary, however, the spirit of community is prevalent in all three middle schools.

Through this organizational arrangement, the teachers at these middle schools can successfully translate philosophy to practice. Without the sense of community or family that is created, it would be difficult, if not impossible for teachers to get to know their students well, to collaborate with other teachers on curriculum development, to individualize students' programs, to communicate effectively and frequently with parents, to utilize authentic assessment, or provide students with advisement and support. It is crucial to providing students with the education they require during early adolescence.

Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum and Instruction. Essential to the notion of "developmental responsiveness" is a balanced core curriculum and varied instruction that accommodates middle students' diverse needs and interests. What happens in the classrooms of a middle school is an important indicator of the consistency between middle school philosophy and middle school practice.

Beane (1990) states that "if middle level schools are to be based upon characteristics of early adolescents, then the curriculum should be redesigned along developmentally appropriate lines, rather than simply a slightly revised version of high school curriculum" (p. 68). Compton (1984) believes that curriculum and instruction in the middle years must be balanced and comprises the following components: (a) preparation for society, (b) a focus on adolescent needs and changes, (c) incorporation of the affective, cognitive and psychomotor domains, (d) consideration of a wide range of ability, and (e) provision for student choice and individual interests.

Many middle school authors emphasize the value of integrating curriculum into thematic or interdisciplinary units that are drawn from real life problems and topics that adolescents care about (Black, 1995). Beane (1990) also asserts that the curriculum should meet adolescents' need to identify with serious issues in the world. Opportunities should be provided for students to plan and implement projects relating to these issues and to connect students with community concerns. Interdisciplinary studies allow students to connect knowledge and skills between the disciplines (NASSP Council on Middle Level Education, 1993). This better prepares them for future learning experiences and careers which tend to be more interdisciplinary in nature. Core and semi-core programs give teachers large blocks of time to use as they wish and responsibility for at least two core subjects. In addition, at all three schools teacher teams provide teachers with opportunities to successfully integrate the disciplines. At Silver Creek Middle School, for example, the grade seven pod of teachers collaborated on a thematic unit, titled "Structures and Design," which encompassed concepts and skills from mathematics, science and language arts. Their environmental education programs also link real life learning experiences to various part of the curriculum in an attempt to promote life-long appreciation and responsibility for their world. At Delta Lake Middle School, teacher teams strive to make curriculum meaningful and a reflection of future learning experiences. The recent implementation of the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program at Delta Lake Middle school helps students relate the content of the classroom to the local and international community. The five interaction areas: approaches to learning, community

service, environmental studies, inventiveness, health and social education are incorporated into all of the core disciplines together, therefore, linking the curriculum through common instructional goals. Delta Lake also has a very strong community service program, which as The Indiana State Department of Education points out, encourages students to become active, responsible citizens and links them to real life learning situations (1991). At Rosewood Middle School the closely knit learning community structure allows interdisciplinary units to be coordinated and taught with greater ease. In particular, the grade six team has developed several interdisciplinary themes. Finally, it is apparent from each school's identified goals that technology studies are integrated throughout all of the disciplines at the school, another example of how skills and concepts are translated to disciplines rather than taught in isolation.

When planning curriculum and instruction, middle school educators must be knowledgeable and considerate of the cognitive and psycho-social needs of early adolescents. Responsive middle school curriculum and instructional design should be focused on teaching students to think critically; students should be actively engaged in inquiry, discovery, reasoning, and problem-solving across all subject areas (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Education, 1989). Williamson and Johnston (1996) state that authentic learning incorporates the use of " instructional processes that require students to analyse, synthesize and evaluate information, demonstrate learning through projects and products, minimize permanent group assignments and infuse technology to create and use information" (p. 5). Manning and Eichorn (1984) list hands-on experiences which foster creativity and stimulate interests and mastery of essential processes rather than information acquisition as appropriate instructional practices for early adolescent.

Irvin, Valentine, and Clark (1994) stress that a "variety of instructional strategies is imperative to address the diverse learning needs of young adolescents" (p. 57). All three schools tend to utilize an approach to learning that is student-directed and process-based. This tends to facilitate individual cognitive thinking skills rather than the mere reception of information. In school literature, interviews, and observations, "active learning" and "a variety of instruction" were referred to when describing the instructional practices at all

three schools. Varied instructional practices encompass a wide range of student groupings, physical arrangements and locations for learning, resource and technology use, activities, and products for demonstrating learning. This does not mean that teacher directed instruction does not occur at these middle schools. Rather, students are given much more time and opportunity to apply and explore concepts either on their own or in groups. "Minds-on learning," in the form of group, individual and teacher-directed learning is the key term used to describe instruction at Delta Lake. In addition, Delta Lake's International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program includes "approaches to learning" as one of its five curriculum strands. This includes teaching study skills, how to learn, independent thinking skills, problem-solving and decision making. The "Homo Faber" strands focuses on inventiveness and creativity. Silver Creek and Rosewood both describe themselves as "child-centred." The role of the teacher is considered to be one of coach and facilitator of learning; they tend to provide learning situations rather than merely deliver content. At all three schools, mathematics and science instruction is heavily dependent on providing concrete experiences first in order for students to then more easily grasp abstract concepts.

According to Williamson and Johnston (1996), authentic learning means accepting that children learn at different rates and come from different interests and backgrounds" (p. 5). Dorman (1984) also identifies the need for diversity in the educational programming of early adolescents. The NASSP (1993) also believe that differentiation, responding to a wide range of adolescent development stages and learning styles through curriculum and instructional strategies should be developed in a responsive middle school. The three schools studied incorporate differentiation into curriculum and instruction through various forms. All of the schools have adopted the inclusive education model; students with special learning needs receive instructional assistance from special education teachers and/or assistants in the regular classroom. Learning community teachers and assistants work together to plan and implement individualized special needs programs. Programs like differentiated math, the International Middle Years Program, small group and individualized enrichment activities also provide an appropriate curriculum for

students who require a challenge. Core teachers are equipped with strategies and knowledge necessary for providing modified curriculum and appropriate instructional strategies. Learning communities, key teacher arrangements, and self-containment also help ensure that teachers see their students often and know them well. As a result, they are better able to provide support to and modifications for students with varied learning needs. The diverse and varied nature of instruction at the middle schools ensures that all students, regardless of their learning rate, styles and needs can achieve personal success.

Student Assessment. Assessment of student progress also reflects the diverse and unique needs of middle level students and is consistent with the instructional strategies in the classroom. The Indiana State Department of Education (1991) advocate the use of "authentic assessment" when evaluating middle level student progress. "Authentic assessment" allows students many opportunities through varied means to demonstrate their achievement and ability. It acknowledges that "there are multiple ways of representing understanding (Rothenburg, 1993. P. 54). At Silver Creek Middle School student progress is "continuously evaluated by teachers using a variance of informal and formal methods all the while keeping in mind the diverse and transitional nature of the middle level child. For assessments where knowledge and skills are tested, both teachers and students engage in describing and developing performance criteria and standards" (Silver Creek Student Handbook, 1996, p. 5). Delta Lake's International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program validates use of a variety of methods to collect information about individual student achievement and as does the Rosewood evaluation policy. Both Silver Creek and Delta Lake school use the collection of student assessment data to create student portfolios. The portfolios not only form the basis of each student's achievement profile, but afford opportunities for students to set personal achievement goals. Teachers who share the same students work together to prepare the portfolios and even meet as a team for parent-teacher-student conferences. The portfolio process also relies on engaging parents in the evaluation process. Teachers share portfolio contents with both parents and students at three-way conferences. The conferences also provide a time for reflection and goal-setting. This supports the work of Irvin, Valentine and Clark (1994) who report that

many middle level schools are considering report card formats that reflect an "awareness of the unique characteristics of the young adolescent learner. . . and accommodate individual differences, contribute to positive self-concept, facilitate student evaluation and promote positive relationships among peers" (p. 57). The belief that students learn differently and that students should play an active role in the evaluation process is fulfilled by all three schools through their assessment and reporting practices. More recently, programs such as Silver Creek's collaborative plan, seeks to engage parents in the learning process at a level that is beyond what is normally done at this level of schooling.

Exploratory Opportunities. The NASSP's Council on Middle Level Education (1993) promotes an exploratory curriculum that allows students to explore their needs, interests, talents and social skills through both academic and recreation school activities. Several other middle school scholars include this exploratory component in their lists or descriptions of middle school characteristics (Manning, 1995; Dorman, 1984; Beane, 1987; NMSA, 1982; George and Alexander, 1993). The National Middle School Association (1996) points out that exploratory programs expose students to a range of academic, vocational, and recreational subjects aimed at stimulating future career options, involving students in community service, and providing enrichment and enjoyment.

At Delta Lake Middle School, one of their core beliefs is that students should have opportunities to develop individual interests, ability, talents and competencies. These opportunities are integrated into both curricular and extra-curricular programs in all three schools. The middle schools that house elementary grades must follow the Alberta Elementary Curriculum and therefore are not able to offer complementary courses as options: French, Music, Band, Drama and Art are all part of the timetable for all students. By grade seven, students are given choices in the areas of applied and practical arts, fine and performing arts, and, in two of the middle schools, a second language. The complementary course offerings range considerably among the three schools and are reflective of each school's curriculum focus. Delta Lake has strong course offerings in the Career and Technology Services (CTS) area with students in grade seven studying all of the six modules. At Rosewood, the strong Band and Music program involves most of the

student body. Silver Creek Middle School also has a strong band program which filters into its extra-curricular programs. It also offers a true "exploratory program"; students can choose two modules from an extensive list each trimester.

Extra-curricular opportunities are aimed at furthering students interests and talents in an environment that focuses on participation and belonging. Because students in the middle school tend to be self-conscious and insecure with respect to the variations in physical development, athletic programs should both allow for physical differences and emphasize cooperation and participation. "Activities that emphasize competition, exclusion and recognition of a few students should be avoided in the middle school" (Texas Education Agency, 1991, p.18). Extra-curricular activities should stress physical education and intramural programs, lifetime sports and leisure time activities (McKay, 1990). All three schools focus on meeting student needs and interests with programs that provide success experiences for all students. Generally, students are encouraged to join teams, rather than "trying out" for teams, so that students can experience participation in a school team. Both intramural and extra-curricular sports events emphasize participation, fair play, skill development and cooperation. Clubs, productions, and committees are also open to all students and are formed based on student and staff interest.

Each school has embraced the philosophy that exploratory and extra-curricular programs play an important role in "stimulating interest in new areas and providing opportunities for students to experience success" (George and Shewey, p. 1993, p. 94). Each school has also interpreted its philosophy in different ways, choosing to cultivate subjects beyond the core curriculum that suit the interests, strengths and needs of the students and community.

Student Recognition and Responsibility. When students experience success at some aspect of school, whether it be curricular or non-curricular, this translates to an improved self-concept and attitude towards school. The three schools also attribute positive student esteem to a more positive school climate. In addition to what happens in the classroom and extra-curricular activities, the schools have implemented programs specifically aimed at achieving and maintaining a positive learning environment for all staff and students.

The research on adolescent development provides a strong basis for the need for middle schools to consider students' psychological and emotional characteristics when providing appropriate programming. Manning (1996) notes that the psycho-social changes have important implications for student self-esteem and school climate. One of these changes is described as the increasing need for freedom and independence from adult authority. In this search, they "may rebuke authority, engage in vandalism or become involved in sex, alcohol, or drugs" (Manning, 1996, p. 19). Involving in these behaviours gives adolescents a sense of freedom from adult authority and a sense of allegiance to peers. Another change relates to changing self-esteem, which is influenced by all aspects of students' lives. Eichorn states that early adolescents are constantly, "defining and testing their views of themselves, their worth as a person, and building self-confidence to assume different responsibility and challenges" (Eichorn, 1984, p.28).

This adjusting view of themselves, particularly when students undergo the transition from elementary school to middle school can have a "negative impact on young adolescents' self-esteem" (Manning, 1996, p. 20). Manning emphasizes that developmentally appropriate middle schools understand these psycho-social changes and provide opportunities for students to (a) win recognition for skills, abilities and accomplishment, (b) have appropriate learning experiences that address psycho-social changes, (c) understand the influence of peers and the need to benefit from positive peer pressure, (d) understand how behaviour affects others, and (e) understand the significant of increased independence and responsibility. In support of the research by Manning and Eichorn the three schools have strong programs that both provide positive recognition to students and ensure students learn to be responsible for their behaviour.

Positive behaviour plans seek to both teach and reinforce attitudes and behaviours that are necessary for a positive learning environment. Delta Lake has a well established recognition program that includes positive referral letters or phone calls and classroom or student assemblies in which students receive awards for many kinds of accomplishments. Silver Creek's unique "effort roll" sends the message to students that behaviour, attitude and work habits are held in as high esteem as academic achievement. The principal of

Rosewood Middle attributes a number of school programs and practices to reinforcing positive behaviour: assemblies that recognize student accomplishments, school concerts, intramural, and advisory activities. In addition, various middle school practices that at first seem intangible contribute to positive behaviour. At Delta Lake, this is referred to as the "preventative dimension." The "preventative dimension" ensures students have opportunities to contribute to the operation of the school, are well-connected with each other and a caring adult who knows them well, and can succeed at something.

Because of the psycho-social changes that adolescents undergo with respect to behaviour, attitude, peer relationships, and independence, it is essential that the middle schools develop effective behaviour management programs to maintain a positive school climate. This is another area where learning communities, pods, or teacher teams work together. Establishing rules and consequences that are consistent from teacher to teacher is crucial. Secondly, teachers collaborate to develop and monitor individual behaviour plans, confer with parents and students, and consult with counsellors or administrators when necessary. The three schools have also made sure to place the responsibility for behaviour on its students: students are active participants in reflecting on behaviour and developing a plan of action to improve their behaviour. Although the administrators do provide support for staff members either through consultation or in dealing with severe problems, the teachers in the school are responsible for managing student behaviour.

Understanding the psycho-social developmental changes of middle schoolers helps educators to develop appropriate programs that address these changes. Giving students recognition contributes positively to their self-esteem. A strong behaviour management program ensures that students become responsible citizens and that the learning environment is safe, supportive, and positive.

Being developmentally responsive begins with a school philosophy that recognizes that adolescents are in transition and have unique characteristics and needs. However, the three schools do more than philosophize; they merge the research on adolescent development with their own beliefs about middle schooling to ensure that what happens in and outside the classroom is responsive. The principal of Silver Creek expresses the affect

of developmentally responsive school practices as the following: "When the classroom practices meet student needs, students are happy. When students are happy, they look forward to coming to school."

Theme 2: Developing Adult-Student Relationships

The development of adult-student relationships in order to help students through the changes that occur during the middle years is another key component of the three middle schools. One of the important principles embodied by effective middle school is that they should be a place where close, trusting relationships with adults and peers create a climate for personal growth and intellectual development (Peppard and Rottier, 1990). The formation of interdisciplinary teams or learning communities is an attempt to reorganize schools into small communities in which students and adults get to know each other well (Indiana State Department of Education, 1991). This reduces the stress of anonymity and isolation on students, and ensures that all students have a small caring group of adults with whom they can talk to about academic matters and personal problems. Through a strong guidance program and student advisement, schools can successfully create this climate. McKay (1990) advocates that it is the responsibility of the entire middle school faculty and administration to provide guidance and advisement.

Advisory. Considerable middle school research advocates the inclusion of an advisory program in the middle school. The goal of advisor-advisee programs is to provide "regular opportunities for interaction with small groups of peers and a caring adult" (NMSA, 1992, pp. 18-19). Along with a structured, guidance program, McEwin (1984) believes that a carefully planned teacher-based guidance program is essential because of the traumatic physical, intellectual, and social/emotional changes that adolescents experience in middle schools. Students need one special teacher to provide understanding and support. In addition, the Texas Education Agency (1991) supports the assignment of an adult advisor to a small group of students to promote successful academic habits, interpersonal relations, self-esteem, and healthy lifestyles.

Although all three middle schools established a formalized, structured advisory program when they opened, only Rosewood Middle School has continued to sustain the advisory class. Their program is aimed at "bridging the gap between the elementary and high school by providing every student with an adult advisor and a peer group of fellow students" (Rosewood Middle School Student Handbook, 1996-97). Their structured advisory program address the affection domain of middle schoolers: personal development, relationships with peers and adults, and self-esteem. It also address behaviours and attitudes that support the academic domain. Their program has been evolving since the school's inception and the stakeholders believe that the program is essential in enhancing both student achievement and social and personal growth.

Interestingly, the principal of Rosewood does foresee a time when the goals of advisory can be fulfilled through the learning communities. Both Silver Creek and Delta Lake Middle School have eliminated their structured advisory program. Both schools strive to achieve the goals of the middle school advisory program through other programs and structures. Key or home room teachers are able to provide considerable time and opportunities to connect with students because of the large amount of time they see students. Although a formalized advisory guarantees the allotment of time for student advisement, instructional time and home room periods can often be used more effectively to address advisory goals because of the more developed relationships between students and key teachers. Issues concerning academics, organization, behaviour, peer relations and personal problems are often more effectively addressed by the key teacher. At both schools, student also have opportunities to raise concerns and issues through class meetings, grade level meetings, student councils, Peer Support Programs, and advisory committees. Silver Creek also provides opportunities for students to interact across the grades during lunch hour and cross-graded activities. The elimination of a structured advisory program is consistent with the writings of Williamson and Johnston (1996). They believe in the value of giving students access to an adult advocate who would offer guidance and address adolescent concerns but emphasize that this would naturally occur if middle schools created effective learning communities. Their writing points out that many

advisory programs are not effectively or successfully implemented and that adolescent concerns and issues are best raised with the adult in the school who knows them best: their home room or "key" teacher. The Indiana State Department of Education (1991) also emphasizes the role that interdisciplinary teams or small learning communities in the provision of an adult advocate or advisor to all students.

Guidance. The formal guidance programs at all three schools are a response to the psycho-social changes that students experience during the middle school years. The struggle to develop an identity amidst the influences of family, peers, and school can cause great instability and insecurity for adolescents (Manning, 1995). Students need help developing appropriate social skills, developing values and a sense of morality, understanding their developing self, understanding how their behaviour affects others, becoming more independent and responsible, developing and maintaining friendships, and understanding the impact of peer pressure (Manning, 1995). Each school has developed its own strong guidance program which operates in a way that is consistent with the school's belief system. In keeping with the strong teaming concept at Delta Lake, students experiencing any type of serious difficulties are referred to the school counselling team and then further connected with the counselling team member who knows them best. Both Rosewood Middle School and Silver Creek have one staff member with specialized training in counselling, who is also not a teacher. Their programs are specifically geared to the middle years, ages 10-14. They work with individuals, small groups or whole classes on socialization skills and issues related to personal development. They teach workshops and provide consultative services to teachers and parents. All three counselling structures operate a peer support program so that students may help other students in crisis. The guidance programs at all three schools provide more than just individual counselling; the impact on the student body is widespread.

The important role that both teacher guidance and formal guidance programs play in addressing the affective domain of adolescents is evidence of what these schools believe further defines the middle school: the recognition that adolescence is a period when individuals undergo many changes and these changes have a profound impact on students'

psychological well-being. These middle schools take responsibility for supporting students through these changes by implementing programs that are as critical to middle level education as curriculum and instruction.

The three schools in the study also provide realistic examples of how specific programs advocated in the literature on middle schools do not necessarily successfully translate to actual school practice. This phenomenon supports the recommendations of Johnston and Williamson (1996). They assert that responsive middle schools incorporate themes rather than adhere to strict programs or characteristics. They also support the importance of tailoring programs to fit the school rather than tailoring the school to fit the program, an important practice espoused by one middle school principal.

Theme #3: Shared Leadership

Although the concept of participatory decision-making is not unique to the middle school, it is certainly an integral part of the learning community concept of collaboration. All three principals embrace a style of leadership that encourages involvement by all stakeholder groups in the decision-making process. Their leadership style is one that entertains the sharing of leadership in the school. As a result, there is a large proportion of teacher leaders on the three school staffs. The principal of Rosewood Middle School strongly articulates that participatory leadership promotes an "enhancement of teacher authority and status and provides parents and students opportunity to have meaningful input."

The middle school literature is highly supportive of shared leadership. George and Shewey (1993) attest to the "value and utility of involvement and empowerment" of providing "authentic collaboration between and among teachers, administrators, parents and students" (p. 99). McKay (1995) advocates that "the foundation of middle level leadership is that it will be shared. The middle school needs more leadership, not less. Along with middle level school planning is the expectation that the leader will lead other leaders" (p. 48). Peppard and Rottier (1990) support the belief that decisions concerning the education experience of middle school students should be made by adults who know

them best. This shifts the decision-making role from one confined to administrators to one including teachers, parents, and even students themselves. A shared decision making model gives teachers greater influence in the classroom, establishes governance committees, and designates leaders among staff and students (Indiana State Department of Education, 1991).

The Learning Community/Team. Although the schools use different terms when describing their decision-making model, the basic roles and functions of the participants are very similar. The school literature from Delta Lake outlines the premise of its decision-making model which is also applicable to the other two schools: "Teachers and students in the middle school are empowered. Decisions are made at the right level: where all of the action is happening, in the classroom." The principal of Rosewood cites "good communication and good representation" as the keys to an effective decision-making process at that school. Their model involves all stakeholder groups through a multitude of devices including memos, surveys, informal dialogue, committee work, sharing information and consultation. At all three schools the learning community or interdisciplinary team is the key structure for decision making in all three schools. Generally, the discussion of grade level or school wide concerns and issues are brought to the team level by the team leader or coordinator who serves as a liaison between the administrative team and the teachers. The team leader communicates the direction of the team to members of the administration or to members of committees also called action groups or leadership teams. These groups are representative of the different grade level teams and sometimes include support staff, parents or even students. Their role is to examine issues or school initiatives, develop a plan of action and then monitor the implementation of the plan. They are in constant communication with the other stakeholders, receiving input and direction for the final decision or plan. The creation of decision-making committees has brought about a leadership structure that is truly shared. It has also allowed teacher leaders to emerge as they take on administrative type roles and responsibilities for various areas of the school's operation. A teacher at Silver Creek Middle School summarizes the role of staff members in the decision-making process as

the following: "Although the staff may not always be involved in the final decision-making, they are always involved in setting the school's direction."

Parents and Students. Engaging the other two stakeholder groups is another essential characteristic of the schools' decision-making process. Williamson and Johnston (1996) assert that parents should be invited to participate in the site-based governance of the school. The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Education (1989) calls for engaging parents in meaningful roles in school governance and keeping them informed about the school. Beane (1996) advocates empowering students by giving them frequent opportunities to participate in decisions that affect them. At all three middle schools, parents and students play an important role in the operation of the school through various formal and informal structures.

Empowering students begins at the classroom level where teachers provide students with input into their learning by offering them some choices with respect to curriculum and instruction, addressing student concerns and questions both individually and during class meetings, and encouraging students to give input to student council representatives. The schools all have some formal structures such as student advisory groups, peer support and student council through which students can be involved in school processes and organization. By increasing opportunities for students to provide genuine input into their learning and school affairs, their sense of ownership for the school increases. Students feel part of the "community" or "family", which makes for a more positive school climate.

The role of parents in school governance is particularly strong at these three middle schools and is not limited to participation on parent councils. Rosewood Middle School has always engaged parents in the operation of the school; in fact, the parents were instrumental in initiating its opening. Silver Creek is continuously increasing the role of parents in both student learning and governance through their collaborative plan. Parents are members of school committees and action groups alongside teaching staff. Staff members at all of the schools specifically referred to the term "open door policy" to describe the informal input that occurs daily from both parents and students. Encouraging and providing for parent involvement in school governance, either informal of formal,

gives parents a sense that the school is a part of the community and that the school staff works with them in supporting their child's learning and development. As a result, the three schools enjoy overwhelming support from their parent communities.

Theme #4: Continuous School Renewal

The principal of Delta Lake School describes one of the most fundamental differences between the middle school and the traditional junior high model as the extent to which middle schools are involved in continuous change and improvement. This also applies to the other two schools; processes which promote reflection and feedback from all stakeholders occur regularly and provide the basis for school improvement. As Karen Whitney states, this process keeps the school "responsive and responsible." As student needs arise and change, as staff members strive to improve their teaching, or as societal pressures and expectations change, the three middle schools set new directions to accommodate these internal and external influences.

Middle school literature primarily limits its discussion on this topic to recommending that schools have some form of school renewal program. Alexander and George (1993) include " a smooth and continuous program of staff development, renewal, and school improvement focused on the unique concerns of middle school education" on its list of essential middle school elements (p. 35). Wavering (1995) points out that teaching requires continuous self-assessment in order to sustains its dynamic nature. Therefore, personal and professional growth is considered a key to successful teaching in a middle school. The Texas Education Agency (1991) recommends that middle schools engage in ongoing in-services and training in the issues and strategies related to their work with young adolescents. Administrators should also be provided with ongoing training in instructional leadership in middle school concepts. At all three schools, the focus of much of the professional development that teachers are engaged in is related to the focus on "developmental responsiveness." Teachers frequently develop their classroom teaching practices so that they can better meet the needs of students. Both outside and internal

professional development often include such topics as teacher teaming, student assessment, exploratory curriculum, differentiated learning, and interdisciplinary studies.

Williamson and Johnston (1996) state that accountable schools gather and analyse data as part of the commitment to program improvement. Responsive middle schools are "eager to examine successes as well as failures" (p. 7). In addition, they believe that "responsive middle schools embrace a range of organizational models, monitor and adjust their programs, and are comfortable challenging the orthodoxies of the middle school movement" (p. 1).

At Delta Lake Middle School, school improvement has always been an important part of the process of determining whether their programs are best for student achievement. They have made substantial changes to the decision-making process, involving more stakeholder groups and creating more leaders. They have refined their key teacher arrangement, eliminating the need for an advisory program. The staff has become more flexible in order to better meet student needs, making frequent grade and subject changes and considering even more flexible timetabling. More recently, they have used staff reviews and surveys to help determine the school's direction. At Delta Lake, each year brings forth further changes as staff members re-examine their beliefs about middle level education to determine whether their practices still reflect these beliefs.

The staff at Silver Creek is always growing and learning. Continuous learning through informal and formal professional development is valued and encouraged by leaders. Staff members also identify areas for improvement within grade teams. These areas generally arise from the need to improve a specific area of the school, the desire to be more "developmentally responsive," or to better meet community needs. The "respect and responsibility" goal has been ongoing since 1992 and began as a need to refine the discipline cycle in the school to improve school climate. It continues to be a focus as different needs arise each year, such as this year's focus on student bullying and harassment. Many initiatives arise from individual teacher or team goals such as the grade seven podding arrangement, the new exploratory program, or even new ways to report student progress. The principal at Silver Creek is a strong visionary leader who

encourages the staff to keep thinking about the middle school concept and whether the school's programs and practices are connected to the ideals set out in the mission statement. As Lauren Benson points out, "there are no doors closed on innovation."

Professional development has been a way of life for the staff at Rosewood since it opened. Its principal, Donna Abbott, has always encouraged professional reading, participation in external workshops and conferences, and internal staff development projects. She keeps the staff current on adolescent development research and middle school practice. Their school improvement projects have generally been related to refining the school's middle school programs: advisory, learning communities, inclusive education, and differentiated learning. Areas for school improvement are targeted through student, parent and teacher surveys. Individual surveys and learning community discussion sets the goals for the school's Annual School Plan. Donna Abbott notes that through the years the staff, parents, and students have "done a lot of growing together" in the quest for "developmental responsiveness."

All three schools have been responsive to external pressures, as well. The rapidly changing technological world has made technology a primary goal at each school. Each school has integrated and organized the technology in the school differently to meet its technology learning goals and core and exploratory curriculum. Each school has developed a long-term plan which clearly defines its direction for technology integration into student learning. Being visionary and progressive are characteristics of these three middle schools.

Interestingly, the theme of continuous school change contributes not only to the schools' success, but to their difficulties. Teachers describe their middle school as "exciting," progressive," and an environment that "supports innovation." Conversely, implementing new programs, refining curriculum and instruction, and changing grades and subject regularly involves considerable energy and work. Teachers at Rosewood express some frustration with always trying to "catch up" with new school programs or other changes that seem to occur more frequently at the middle school than at other levels. At all three schools, staff members note that the large amount of committee work

associated with school improvements can be demanding. All three principals agree, however, that being responsive is what makes their schools successful, and being responsive is synonymous with continuous reflection, refinement and renewal.

Theme #5: The Uniqueness of the Middle School Staff

Through personal interviews with the principals and teachers at the three middle schools, it was clear that the factor that contributes most to their schools' success is the staff. The staff at these middle schools are committed to adolescent education. Although diverse, their experiences, knowledge and attitude provide them with the tools to make a positive impact on students of this age level. They are eager to collaborate, to learn and adapt on a regular basis, and to expend energy and time developing relationships with their students. Although the specific programs and practices enable the middle school philosophy to become a reality more easily, the staff is key to making the schools "developmentally responsive."

Principals. The three leaders of the middle schools in the study share certain qualities that are highly conducive to the middle school themes previously described in this chapter. According to Irvin, 1992, "Middle schools are primarily effective because of committed, informed, courageous, dynamic leadership" (p. 97). Shiniok and Schnoker (1992) emphasize the importance of leadership in communicating vision, defining purpose and assuring outcomes and Joan Lipsitz's (1984) research on successful schools for adolescents found that the vision, or clarity of purpose about middle schooling sets these schools apart. All three middle school principals are visionary leaders; they possess a clear vision of middle school education and are effective at what one principal calls "conceptualizing, articulating and communicating" this vision to staff, students and the parent community. The principals serve as constant reminders to the rest of staff that they are to strive to do what is best for middle school students.

However, the vision of the middle school cannot be possessed solely by its administrators. It is essential that the beliefs and values developed in the mission statement be shared by its teachers. Therefore, the principal must be able to effectively

articulate this vision over time. Symbolic leaders communicate their vision through a "continuous stream of symbolic actions" (Irvin, 1992, p. 98). This translates to such practices as spending time in the classroom with students, downplaying management concerns in favour of educational issues, providing a unified vision through words and examples, and by being active participants in school activities and staff development. Through personal interviews and observations, it was clear that the principals are a highly visible, accessible and involved leadership presence in the three schools. They spend their days actively engaged with students, teachers and parents. Their role is facilitator and supporter, not manager or dictator. These principals also realize that modelling responsive middle school practices is a powerful way to communicate the middle school vision. By practising collaboration within an administrative team, being open communicators, and by engaging staff in their own professional development and growth, they are able to send a strong message to their staff about what is appropriate and expected practice in the middle school.

All three principals have adopted an administrative style that encourages and expects all members of the learning communities to be involved in the leadership in the school. According to Shockly in Irvin (1992), middle school leaders encourage and allow leadership to emerge from others in the school. They recognize others whose abilities complement their own, and rely on these formal or informal substitutes. All three principals have been described as open to teacher initiatives and innovations. They support and facilitate teachers who develop and implement new ideas at both the classroom and school level. In fact, many of the school improvements and changes are initiated at the teacher team level. The promotion of shared leadership allows teachers to grow professionally and to have the opportunity to utilize their strengths and interests to fulfill their goals. It also identifies present or future leadership personnel who often eventually move from the middle school into leadership positions outside the school.

Shared, collaborative decision making is inherent to the middle school concept and appropriate for practices such as cooperating learning, teaming, and teacher guidance programs. The three middle school principals develop and maintain participation from

other staff members, parents and to a certain extent, students in much of the school's operation through leadership teams, committees, site-based action groups, the school council, and student advisory groups. These principals are comfortable relinquishing the control over decision making in the school, appreciating that the collaborative approach brings people together to word towards a common vision.

Teaching Staff. All three principals have had considerable control over staff hiring and have therefore chosen teachers whose characteristics will suit the middle school concept and complement their own leadership style. Although their educational and professional backgrounds vary, the middle school teachers seem to share certain characteristics that contribute to the successful implement of the middle school concept and a positive school climate.

In This We Believe, the National Middle School Association lists as its first essential element of middle schools, "Educators knowledgeable and committed to young adolescents" (p. 14). The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development also recommends staffing middle schools with specially prepared teachers. This recommendation has been echoed in much of the middle school literature (Peppard and Rottier, 1991; California State Department of Education, 1987). The National Association of Secondary School Principal's Council on Middle Level Education (1985) stresses that

> Middle Level youngsters require special kinds of attention and teaching. Therefore, it is important that only the very best teachers - those who understand the subjects they teach and the development of early adolescents - be permitted to work with these dynamic youngsters. (p. 13)

Until very recently, there has not been a teacher education program specifically geared to middle level education in Alberta. The teachers at the three schools are generally trained in either elementary or secondary education. Therefore, there is no consistency with respect to the educational training of the teachers, and they are not "specially prepared" as is recommended in the Carnegie Council's report. Because the middle school concept is so new in Alberta, their knowledge about middle schooling may be rather limited when they are initially hired. However, the teachers who have been selected to teach at these

schools do share an important quality: their desire and commitment to working with middle level students and some knowledge about the characteristics and needs of early adolescents. One of the teachers at Silver Creek describes this quality as "kid sense." George et al. (1992) describe this "child-centredness" as crucial to working with such middle level programs as cooperative learning, exploratory learning, and individualized instruction. Generally, teachers with an elementary generalist background adapt more easily to these middle school programs as they are natural extension of elementary education practices. Having an understanding and empathy for the changes that adolescents undergo allows teachers to provide a more flexible program directed at meeting these varied and continuously changing needs. The principal of Delta Lake points out that the teachers all came to Delta Lake because they wanted to be involved in a different, hopefully better, type of educational experience for adolescents.

The teachers who best fit into the organizational structure of the schools share a desire to be collegial, to learn and grow professionally, and to take on various leadership roles. Spindler and George (1984) point out that one "cannot run a school based on cooperative learning, teaming, and teacher guidance programs without the collaboration of the faculty" (p. 293). Because the nature of the middle school is that it is ever-evolving, teachers must have a desire to be involved in both individual professional growth and team or school-wide improvement iniatitives.

Wavering (1995) believes that an important professional competency of middle school teachers is their committment to self-evaluation for professional growth. He also notes that ideal middle school teachers are cooperative and collaborative in nature. Because the interdisciplinary team or learning community concept is inherent to the operation of these schools, teachers must be comfortable with and willing to work closely with other teachers and support staff. Those who prefer to work in isolation become frustrated quickly with teaching at a middle school and often transfer to high schools or traditional junior high schools. Finally, as one principal notes, ideal middle school teachers are "movers and shakers." They take risks in the classroom with curriculum and instructional practices; they are at the centre of team or school initiatives and lead or participate on school

committees. Ironically, many middle school teachers become such strong leaders, they eventually leave the very environment that has developed their skills for more advanced positions in education. Losing strong staff members can be problematic for middle schools. It also means a continuous influx of new staff members who must become familiarized and embrace the middle school concept.

The success of all middle school programs depends most on the qualities of the teachers. Advisory programs, whether integrated or structured, require teachers who have a strong ability to connect with adolescents personally, as well as academically. These are not qualities that teachers learn easily; they are qualities that are related to personality and attitude. Wavering (1995) identifies the following personal qualities of middle school teachers as ideal: enthusiastic, optimistic, a good listener, positive self-concept, sense of humour, flexible, cooperative, spontaneous, respectful of others, and caring. Several of these qualities have been mentioned by principals and teachers of the three middle schools as important qualities to possess. The principal of Silver Creek emphasizes that "the teachers who are the most successful at the middle school are those who will take the time to sit down with kids at lunch hour, talk to them in the hallway, anticipate some of their mood swings." In addition, programs such as multi-year progression, core or semi-core teaching, inclusive education are demanding in their requirement that teachers constantly learn new curriculum and develop appropriate instructional strategies for various learning levels. As such, successful middle school teachers tend to have high amounts of energy and enthusiasm. They do, however, realize and often feel that the middle school environment can be too demanding. The balance between middle school teaching and personal life is a challenge that several staff members articulated. Even one of the principals readily admitted that middle schools require more work from the staff than the traditional junior high model.

The challenge of uniting individuals with different professional backgrounds and beliefs in a common vision is ongoing at the three middle schools. The school relies strongly on the collaborative efforts of its staff, yet its reliance on the teachers as initiators and leaders can work in opposition to the notions of collaboration and unification.

Working at a middle school also demands much from its staff: hard work, commitment, time, flexibility, patience, tolerance, and often a willingness to sacrifice individual goals or beliefs for the common good. Conversely, a large majority of the middle school teachers interviewed described the great rewards of working in the middle school environment. The opportunity to grow professionally, the supportive, collegial atmosphere, the relationships that develop with students, and the overall positive climate of these middle schools made it all worth it.

Implications for Research and Practice

The emergence of these themes from three middle schools provides a first glance at how schools in this province interpret the middle school concept which is already well-established in the United States. For other schools that have already or are presently embracing the middle school concept over traditional forms of adolescent education, there is much to consider from the experiences of these three schools. As this is the first study to examine the middle school concept in depth in Alberta, there is also considerable room for further research.

Implications for Practice

The most important implication from this study for middle school practitioners is a discovery that the schools made during their first few years of their evolution. This discovery has been confirmed by middle school scholars, Ron Williamson and Howard Johnston in their essay, "Through the Looking Glass: The Future of Middle Level Education" (1996). Merely implementing a list of middle school characteristics, such as those developed by the National Middle School Association or middle school writers Paul George and William Alexander, is no assurance of success. When these exemplary middle schools opened, they were embarking on a journey to create a learning environment that would have one all-encompassing purpose: to be responsive to the developmental characteristics and needs of its students while also being responsive to the needs of the community it serves. Each school has created a learning environment that is unique, but one that is also responsive. In their journey they have also discovered what is important about the process of becoming and maintaining a responsive school.

Developmental Responsiveness. The first important step that each staff took when the schools opened was to examine their beliefs about middle school education and merge them with the research on adolescent development. In fact, this research should provide the basis for every program and practice in a middle school. The term "developmental responsiveness" was used by each school's leader to refer to the agreement between a middle school's programs and practices and the developmental needs of adolescents. Each school had its own unique way to achieve developmental responsiveness. Some middle schools connected teachers and adults through a structured advisory program while others accomplished the same goal through its core or semi-core teaching arrangement. Each school uses its instructional time to achieve its program goals uniquely. There is no one perfect timetable or schedule; time was manipulated and organized in a way that would best meet the needs of the students. Similarly, exploratory or complementary courses, student reporting, and special education or enrichment programs were handled somewhat differently at each school. Each community valued certain programs, such as music or environmental education. Each school had a different student population that required specialized programming such as English as a Second Language, or extensive gifted and talented programming. Despite these differences, each school has remained focused on providing an education both within and outside the classroom that best meets the unique and transitional needs of early adolescents.

Involvement of Stakeholders. It is also essential for each school to consider its community when developing the philosophy or mission that will serve as the school's driving force. It is important to note that all three schools have and continue to engage their parents, and even at some levels their students, in the operation of the school. Rosewood Middle School is an exceptional example of how the school and the parents worked together to create a shared vision of what they wanted their middle school to be. As a result of this strong parental involvement, all three schools are strongly supported by their communities. Teachers are also empowered through teacher teams, site-based action groups and through leadership that encourages staff development and innovation. A administrative style that shares leadership and allows all stakeholders to participate in the

decision-making process works best in the middle school where values such as cooperation, individual responsibility, creativeness, and individual achievement are emphasized. Ensuring that everyone is involved at various levels of decision-making and leadership has been key to these school's success.

Continuous Change. Another implication for emerging middle schools across the province is that realization that to be responsive, middle schools, must continually evolve and improve. None of the three schools have reached a point where their work is complete. Although each school has garnered considerable support from its parent community, they continue to reflect and to examine their programs and practices to more closely fulfill the ideals of their mission. At some or several points during the school year, these schools request feedback from all of their stakeholders on all aspects of the school. They then use this feedback as a source for future directions. This may be the most fundamental distinction between true middle schools and other models of adolescent education: the extent to which these schools continuously renew, restructure, and reexamine their practices.

Middle School Staff. Finally, the middle school concept cannot be successful without a staff that is dedicated to adolescent education and to important principles such as shared decision-making, teacher teaming, teacher-based guidance, and inclusive education. This may be the biggest challenge for new and emerging middle schools. Just as diversity in beliefs and ideas is what makes a school continue to thrive and grow, diversity also makes it challenging for middle schools to unify staff members, to have them all embrace the same programs and practices with the same vigour. It is important for middle school leaders to be clear about what qualities to look for when selecting staff. Child-centredness, a belief in applying adolescent development research to instructional practices, is essential. Teachers must be able to accommodate the varied levels and interests within their classroom or at least be willing to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to do so. Generally, teachers who are subject specialists find the more generalist nature of the middle school frustrating as they may be forced to teach subjects out of their zone of comfort. The ability and desire to take on a guidance role, to address

psychological or social issues in the classroom in addition to academics, is essential. Students at this age require the support of at least one adult in the building who knows them well. Core or semi-core programming and advisory groups provide the time for students and teachers to develop relationships with one another. However, successful teacher-student advisement, depends on the teachers. Teachers must choose to use this time to connect with students individually and feel comfortable addressing issues that are not necessarily academic. Although some teachers fulfill the role of advisor more naturally than others, administrators and other teachers can assist and support new or reluctant teacher advisors in this role.

In addition, because teacher collaboration is an essential principle, principals should select staff members who are predisposed to collaboration. Teachers who prefer to "run their own show," can find the teamwork stifling or an impediment to their classroom program or practices. Finally, emergent middle schools may want to consider whether potential staff members are committed to professional and personal growth. Teachers who want to laminate their lesson plans and use these each year are not in the right educational environment. This may be an extreme example, as the teachers in these middle schools determine their grade or subject level themselves and could therefore choose to teach grade eight year after year. However, the principal's point does refer to the fact that teachers must accept and hopefully embrace professional growth; all of the teachers at some point will be involved in some form of change at the classroom level, team level or even school-wide level. Those who are reluctant to change can appreciate that at least they are given the opportunity to be involved at all phases of the change process.

One principal labels her staff "enablers." Their personal and professional qualities enable participatory leadership to operate, the mission statement to be sustained, reflection and professional development to be actively pursued and the environment of the school to be warm and friendly. Teachers who possess these "enabling qualities" will naturally fit into the middle school environment.

Implications for Research

This study represents an initial glance at a new philosophy and structure for educating adolescents in the province of Alberta. It was necessary for the researcher to limit the study with respect to number of schools, focus questions, and data collection. In addition, the findings suggest additional aspects of middle schools worthy of further research.

The in-depth nature of this study limited the participant schools to three sites. Two leaders in the middle school association in Alberta nominated the schools based on specific criteria. In order to extend the findings of this study, a similar study could be conducted using the same methodology but different schools that meet the same criteria. It is possible that the emerging themes would be slightly different, which would be of value to other middle schools.

In addition, schools meeting different criteria could be studied. For example, schools in their second or third year of operation or newly established middle schools could be examined to determine whether interpretation of the middle school concept varies from schools who have had more time to develop their programs. It is expected that programs, practices, challenges, successes, and future would be different from those of the schools in this study because they have not had as much time to reflect and restructure. Criteria for school selection could also include factors that were not considered in this study. Researchers could choose to only study middle schools who have been transformed from traditional junior high school models or newly established schools that have adopted the middle school concept from the beginning. For an interesting comparative study, an equal number of both of these school origin types could be included in a sample.

Further studies to examine essential middle school themes would provide a basis for researching specific themes in more detail. Researchers could select a larger sample of middle schools and study one middle school concept such as curriculum and instruction, teacher guidance, student organization, teacher teaming, middle school leadership, staff development and school renewal, or decision-making. These studies would produce very specific data that would be valuable to other middle schools who are implementing or restructuring this specific aspect of their school.

The effect that implementation of the middle school concept has on student learning has not been well documented. Middle school staff and parents note improvement in school climate, and one school has tracked the change in attendance when the school became a middle school. Middle school teachers have articulated their belief that the educational environments they have created for middle level students are more responsive to the needs of adolescents and that students are happier at school. A great deal more research is required to present stronger data on this topic as a gap exists not only in Alberta but in the United States where literature and numbers of middle schools are abundant. Additional research could incorporate data on academic achievement, student attitudes, behaviour/wellness, parent reactions, school climate, student attendance and student performance in high schools from both middle schools and other models of adolescent education. A study could focus on the impact of the middle school concept solely on students: student behaviour, attitude towards school, social development, self-esteem, academic or non-academic achievement, and individual progress. Data that provides justification for the middle school concept in the Alberta context is needed for all educators of adolescents. Strong support for the middle school movement exists within schools that are well-established or within specific departments at the university level. However, most educators of adolescents in other school models are either unfamiliar with the concept or sceptical of its value. Those who read the middle school research from the United States may be in agreement with the premise of the middle school, but question its applicability in Alberta or impact on students at this level.

This study was important because of its timeliness. The middle school movement is now officially "off the ground" and moving forward quickly. Each year, more schools adopt the middle school philosophy in an effort to provide a more appropriate education for adolescents. Each school must struggle to discover what middle schooling means in its own context. The literature on middle schools is limited only to the American context and much of it is prescriptive - a "recipe" for the true middle school that may or may not fit the particular needs of a school's staff, students and community. The middle school themes that have emerged from this study have applicability for all schools in the middle. The

themes provide evidence of what three exemplary middle schools in this province believe are essential to their success. They are not a recipe for success; rather, the themes will provide schools with a strong basis for interpreting middle school philosophy in a way that balances the essence of middle schooling with their own unique school and community. It is my hope that this study will prompt considerable more research on middle schools in Alberta to help fill the research gap and assist middle schools on their journey towards a more appropriate and effective learning environment for adolescents.

Chapter 5

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

When I first began my teaching career, I never expected to become involved in adolescent education. In fact, I actually "fell" into middle schooling. This experience became an awakening for me, just as it has for many educators who after many years in junior high school education, discover that teaching adolescents can actually be both exciting and rewarding. My experiences as a teacher in a middle school, as a researcher of middle schools, and as a teacher and observer in junior high schools have profoundly impacted my beliefs about adolescent education. It has caused me to feel both hopeful and frustrated about how adolescents are being educated in Alberta. In reconciling these two divergent feelings, I am comforted by the realization that within such a short time, the number of middle schools in this province has grown tremendously. The possibility that middle schools may outnumber junior high schools in the not too distant future is an exciting thought. My hope is that educators will take the time to learn all they can about this model of adolescent education and intelligently and thoughtfully strive to make their schools more developmentally responsive.

Teaching in a Middle School

My first experience with the middle school concept occurred in September, 1990, when I was hired to teach at one of the province's first middle schools. I was completely unfamiliar with the term "middle school," and my first explanation of this new school was that it housed students from grades five to eight rather than usual junior high configuration of grades seven to nine. At this early juncture, I honestly believed that this was the only difference between the two school terms: grade span. I was slightly uncomfortable with the prospect of teaching the junior high grades again. I had been elementary/special education trained, but had previously taught in a school that spanned from kindergarten to grade nine. I had not particularly enjoyed my experiences teaching grades seven, eight and nine and was not at all confident in my ability to interact with students of this age group.

During the first few days of the school year, I was introduced to several educational concepts that were new to me: advisory block, readers' and writers' workshop, and my own teaching assignment, integrated special education. I was not the only teacher to be in unfamiliar territory. In its transformation from junior high school to middle school, the staff had merged teachers from the feeder elementary school, current junior high teachers and new teachers from outside the area or school district. Middle schooling was new to everyone and we were all feeling our way through this new philosophy and framework together.

I remained at the school for four years until my first child was born. Throughout this time, the school slowly evolved, bringing its programs and its instructional practices closer to an ideal middle school. Defining the ideal middle school took several years, and I suspect that it is a process that is still underway at the school. Each year, the staff members outlined specific areas to target. Student evaluation and reporting, exploratory programs, school climate, inclusive education, curriculum and instruction, and interdisciplinary teams were just some of the areas that both individual teachers and committees explored, implemented or improved upon during my time at the school.

Each year there was a new change, almost akin to a child waking up each morning to a newly decorated bedroom. These changes proved to be both liberating and exciting, despite the considerable amount of work that accompanied each new program or structure. Our leader gave us great autonomy in the classroom and encouraged us to implement new ideas and innovations. As one of the resource room teachers, I helped develop a model of special education that integrated all students into the core subjects. My first experiences with teacher teaming occurred at this time, as it was necessary to plan and modify curriculum with the regular classroom teachers. The teaching staff was the most progressive and current that I had ever experienced. They continuously pushed the boundaries of educational practice to the point where novel ideas became accepted practice. The year that we changed individual subject teaching to a semi-core structure, I had just been given a grade seven humanities assignment and I was thoroughly excited at the possibilities for integrating curriculum and developing instructional practices that

would meet the varied needs of the students in my classroom. Concurrently, we had been working at aligning our assessment practices with our teaching; we started to engage students more in the assessment process and moved away from traditional methods of reporting. We brought in portfolio assessment and began to work on extending the process to include parents.

Reflecting on my tenure at this school, it is difficult to fathom the extent to which this school evolved in a mere four years. It was also amazing at how much my attitude towards teaching adolescents had changed. I felt completely comfortable interacting with students in the middle. I enjoyed their energy, enthusiasm, sense of humour and had learned to understand their challenges and motivation. My resource program had been structured in a most fortunate way in that I followed the students through each grade. This afforded me the opportunity to become well-connected to my students' learning and behavioural characteristics. Within this organizational structure I had also developed relationships with my students that extended beyond merely delivering instruction. I spent time talking to them during lunch, getting to know their interests, their lives, and their feelings. Conversely, I was able to share some of myself with them. I believe that they knew that I cared about them and with students who have learning disabilities, this can have an immense impact on their level of confidence and ultimately, their progress. My increased success with students of this age was also attributed to the knowledge and skills I had gained, primarily from the other teachers at the middle school. During these four years, I had learned much about what constitutes appropriate instructional practices for this age group. I had discovered how to engage middle level students in learning. This discovery, along with the opportunity to get to know my students well contributed greatly to the climate of my classroom. There was little of the tension and stress of constantly managing behaviour; students generally enjoyed learning opportunities and were motivated to succeed. The adversarial attitude that I had experienced at my previous school was minimal. Even now, three years after I left that school, I am moved by the experiences I had teaching in the middle school environment.

When I arrived at the school, it was not much more than an awkward pairing of two elementary grades with two junior high grades. Even the teachers were somewhat separate in their philosophy, teaching practices, and grade level assignments. The school was called a "middle school" and had implemented a few "middle school" programs. Interestingly, the first tangible middle school characteristic, the advisory block, was dismantled within a few years because it wasn't functioning in the manner that the school staff had hoped it would. When I left the school, it had evolved into much more than merely the addition of one or two programs. The entire school had shifted its focus from a content-driven, "junior" version of a high school to a student-centred, adolescent-oriented environment. The school now existed in its own right; its programming was now like no other level of school. I had felt fortunate to be directly involved in this transformation.

Teaching and Observing in Junior High Schools

After a year's absence from the educational field, I returned to university with a renewed interest in the middle school concept. Most of my colleagues were unfamiliar with the concept and had only experienced the junior high school model of adolescent education. They wondered what was different or unique about middle schools, whether it was simply a school that contained both elementary and junior high grade levels I found it difficult to articulate a definition of "middle school", yet I inherently knew that the learning environment we had created more appropriately and effectively met the needs of middle level students than other models I had experienced.

I had other opportunities to observe and teach in several junior high schools. Each school varied slightly in how they delivered programs to students. Some traditional models had also embraced some innovative practices that seemed to bring them much success and support from the community. However, observations and ensuing reflections on these models provoked even more interest and enthusiasm for the middle school model. After spending three weeks teaching in a junior high school, I became frustrated with their system of organizing students for learning and the assigned instructional practices. Groups of students shuffled in and out of my classroom every forty-five minutes: five groups in all. I merely provided the same learning opportunities to each group. After three

weeks, I knew only some of the students' names and certainly had learned very little about them as people. I wondered how a teacher who dealt with so many students during a day could possibly understand why a particular student could not concentrate, understand instructions, or complete assigned work. This structure made it difficult for teachers to become knowledgeable about each student's ability, learning style, work habits, behaviour, home environment, or the social or emotional problems that have such a profound impact on learning. There was so very little time to interact in a meaningful way, to find out why a particular student was upset, or didn't do their homework, or didn't understand a concept. With so many students, it would be extremely time-consuming to maintain ongoing communication with the home. Even their regular teacher admitted that she felt she had barely had time to get to know her students sufficiently for the first report card and parent- teacher conferences. This seemed to be a most impersonal learning environment. I was also frustrated with the very high-school type of curriculum and instructional practices that seemed inappropriate for early adolescents. Many behavioural problems resulted from lessons which did not engage students: content that was not a natural progression from previous learning and teaching methods that forced students to be passive receivers of information rather than active constructors of knowledge. Certainly, this was only one experience at one school, but it was one experience too many.

Two of the schools that I included in my study had the advantage of embracing the concept as a brand new school. Their principals created their schools from a vision that was developed among its stakeholders. They did not have a pre-existing format that needed wide-scale transformation in order to become a more "developmentally responsive" institution. However, Silver Creek Middle School had once been a traditional junior high school, led by the same principal who initiated the sweeping transformation to a middle school. There is no doubt that this transformation took time, hard work, and considerable struggle to bring its diverse staff together to work towards a common middle school vision. It is strong evidence, however, that it can happen successfully. Even a small change such as limiting the number of students each teacher teaches by implementing a core or semi-core teaching arrangement can have an almost immediate

effect on the relationship between teachers and students. When a teacher sees fewer students for greater amounts of time, there is a much greater opportunity for students to develop relationships with the adults in the school. Teachers will also become more familiar with students' individual learning needs and be better able to provide more personalized or appropriate programming. When students are learning in way that reflects rather than ignores their strengths and weaknesses, there is bound to be an improvement in their level of success. Even an advisory program can be an effective way for junior high schools to address issues that were traditionally ignored. By reading middle school literature and visiting established middle schools, adolescent educators can begin to take what may seem like small, but important steps towards providing more responsive programming.

Unfortunately, no amount of internal programming changes within a school will make a school more responsive if the people inside the building aren't committed to adolescent education or school reform. There are many junior high teachers who choose to teach adolescents; they interact with this age group successfully and have a positive impact on their students. There may be just as many teachers who do not have a positive attitude towards this age group. These teachers may be in junior high schools through default or may have slowly become disillusioned with junior high students, who can be more challenging to motivate, have fleeting concentration spans, large amounts of energy, and a preoccupation with social issues. They often have a lack of understanding that early adolescence is a unique developmental stage characterized by specific cognitive, psychological and social changes and issues. Because they lack knowledge about and empathy for adolescence, these teachers have little tolerance for adolescent attitudes and behaviours. They do not make an effort to understand the motivation behind students' attitudes and behaviours. Students who present a challenge to teachers, either behaviourally or academically, are quickly given distasteful labels and in some instances, teachers have given up all hope of reaching them. In addition, the failure of some middle level or junior high schools to provide support structures for teachers heightens the problem: appropriate counselling or guidance services, the opportunity for teacher

advisement through an advisory program or key teacher arrangement, peer support programs, or special education teachers and support staff. For those students who fall through the cracks in these environments, it can seem like there is no one in the building who truly cares about them and who can or will take the time to provide them with the necessary guidance and support. Ultimately, everybody pays the price when we lose students during this extremely crucial stage of their development.

The teacher training routes at universities have contributed to both a lack of specific preparation for middle school teaching and the inappropriate merging of junior high and senior high instructional practice. University students have traditionally been enrolled in either the elementary route or secondary route. Generally, elementary trained teachers teach in elementary schools and secondary trained teachers teach in either junior high schools or senior high schools. Interestingly, the middle schools involved in my study prefer teachers with the more generalist elementary education degree. The secondary route takes a subject specialist approach within its teaching training program. Specialist teachers can be extremely valuable at any level when they share their expertise and work to develop and refine curriculum. However, being more focused on content than on students can be detrimental when teaching adolescents. Schools that house both junior high and senior high students may require their teachers to teach at both levels. Although trained to teach both junior high and senior high, these teachers often resent their junior high classes. In the hopes of somehow forcing their junior high students to immediately mature, they adopt the same behavioural and cognitive expectations for junior high students as for senior high students. The result is that junior high students lose out; they are delivered a watered down version of the senior high curriculum. There is very little age-appropriate instruction: content is delivered through teacher lecture, note-taking, and reading textbooks. Very little differentiation occurs to accommodate varying learning modes or levels. Students are rarely actively engaged in learning activities and seldom have opportunities to work cooperatively. They are given little, if any, input into their learning. Assignments do not provide for student choice or variations. In these environments, there appears to be no recognition that junior high students' cognitive and

psycho-social needs are unlike those of older adolescents. In fact, forcing early adolescents to behave or learn like older adolescents or young adults is as inappropriate as expecting an infant to tie his or her shoelaces.

Despite these unfortunate circumstances, there is cause for great optimism in the area of adolescent education. I also had the opportunity to observe isolated schools within a large system of traditional junior high schools that had chosen to embrace the middle school philosophy. The learning environment they had created was remarkably different from other schools that housed exactly the same grades. Their leaders were visionaries; they had invested in seeking out new ways to provide a more appropriate education to students "in the middle". They were risk-takers; they asked questions, were not afraid to criticize accepted practice, and were resourceful and brave enough to look for and implement solutions. The entire educational system could use more leaders like this. Hopefully, these visionaries will also lead other leaders to closely examine traditional ways of doing things in the hopes of replacing inappropriate practices with more developmentally responsive schooling.

Researching Middle Schools

It took considerable time and effort to design a study that would do justice to such a complex and dynamic institution as a school. It is difficult and probably unfair to provide an image of a middle school solely through words. When I started my data collection, I did not realize that there would be so much to learn about a school. I was also dumbfounded when I discovered how much one group of individuals in one building can accomplish and achieve.

Each school represented to me some of the finest learning environments our educational system has to offer. My observations in classrooms, hallways, school events, staff rooms, and student meeting areas destroyed all stereotypical notions of typical schools for this age level. I have often heard comments from both educators and lay-persons about how difficult, challenging, even unpleasant it must be to teach adolescents. Using my experiences teaching in and researching middle schools as a basis for my response to these comments, I now note that "It doesn't have to difficult or unpleasant. It

can be challenging, but it is also incredibly rewarding and fulfilling." The fact that teachers really like to teach in these schools and students actually seem to like to learn at these schools is a testament to their success. One teacher at Silver Creek Middle School, referred to this phenomenon when she noted that although their students would probably rather be skiing, if they have to be in school, they are happy to be at Silver Creek. This was not hard to believe after observing her humanities class dispersed throughout the school, actively and excitedly engaged in a project about famous architectural structures throughout the world with both a resource teacher and assistant providing individualized support to a number of students in the classroom. This activity was not specifically planned for the researcher's eyes; this type of learning was witnessed in every school at almost any time throughout the day. Even hallway activity in these schools is relaxed and friendly. Students seem happy and eager to learn.

It is difficult to capture atmosphere or climate on paper. This study has tried to paint a portrait of how three schools in Alberta have chosen to educate students in the middle years. It is in sharp contrast to the way that many schools for students in the middle operate. If their choice of learning environments results in academic achievement that is at least as high, if not higher, than other more traditional models, then it seems worth it. It is worth it for no other reason than the creation of students who feel positive about themselves, who feel cared about and supported, who for once have a say in their education, and who actually enjoy learning. I hope educators at all levels of education, from schools to district offices to universities, continue to challenge traditional and accepted practice in adolescent education and take educational risks for the sake of those students who happen to be "in the middle."

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APPENDIX A

Letters to Particating Schools

Jane Johnston
8903 146 St.
Edmonton, Alberta
T5R 0V7

October 27, 1996

School Name:

Dear (Name of subject being interviewed at school):
I am a currently a graduate student at the University of Alberta pursuing a Master of Education degree in the area of Educational Administration. Presently, I am working on the thesis portion of my program. The subject of my thesis is **middle schools in Alberta.** Through an interpretive inquiry using the case study method of research, examining how the middle school concept has been interpreted in three Alberta middle schools. I will also be seeking to answer the following questions:

1. What are the crucial aspects of a middle school?
2. How are these aspects implemented in a middle school?
3. What issues are associated with a middle school, both at its inception and as it evolves?

(School name) is one of three schools which has been selected for the three case studies. The method of collecting data for the study will include reading the school's handbook or other pertinent literature, visiting the school and daily operations of the school (not individual classes), conducting tape-recorded semi-structured interviews with the principal and another staff member, and speaking informally to other staff members. The interviews will be conducted with the principal, and another staff member chosen by the principal who has been directly involved with middle school innovations in the school.

Collecting data will take place over a period of one or two days. The interviews will last approximately one hour with the remainder of the day spent observing the daily operations of the school, speaking with staff members during non-instructional time and reading school literature. After the data is collected, the interviews will be transcribed and together with the other field notes, analyzed to produce descriptions of each school.

To ensure that the descriptions of the school are trustworthy, they will sent to the schools for review before they are included in the final thesis document. At this time, the schools will have an opportunity to correct or delete portions of the descriptions if desired.

In addition, specific procedures for ensuring that the University of Alberta's ethical guidelines for research will be followed. Schools participating in the study or individuals who are scheduled for interviews have the right to opt out of the study before the school visits or interviews are conducted. The participants' real names will not be used in the final thesis document to ensure anonymity. Field notes, transcripts and tapes will only be accessible to the researcher during the study and will then be destroyed after the thesis has been completed and successfully defended.

As the principal of (school name) school/a staff member who has been directly involved in the development of (school name) as a middle school, your descriptions of the school would be of considerable value to my study. Therefore, I am seeking your consent to participate in a semi-structured interview which will be conducted by myself at a time which is convenient for you. If you are able to participate in the study, please sign at the bottom of the page.

I have also enclosed a copy of the questions which I will use as a guide for the interview for your reference. Please feel free to contact me before our scheduled interview if you have any further questions or concerns about the study. My home phone number is 484-6302 and my e-mail address is jlj3@gpu.srv.ualberta.ca.

I look forward to visiting your school and exploring its unique interpretation of the middle school concept!

Sincerely,

Jane L. Johnston

I given my consent to participate in this study on middle schools in Alberta in a semi-structured interview with the researcher, Jane Johnston.

_____ _____

Signature Date

Jane Johnston
8903 146 St.
Edmonton, Alberta
T5R 0V7
October 27, 1996

School name
Address

Dear Staff Member:
I am a currently a graduate student at the University of Alberta pursuing a Master of Education degree in the area of Educational Administration. Presently, I am working on the thesis portion of my program. The subject of my thesis is **middle schools in Alberta.** Through an interpretive inquiry using the case study method of research, I will be examining how the middle school concept is interpreted in three schools in Alberta. I will also be seeking to answer the following questions:

1. What are the crucial aspects of a middle school?
2. How are these aspects implemented in a middle school?
3. What issues are associated with a middle school, both at its inception and as it evolves?

(School name) is one of three schools which has been selected for the three case studies. The collection of data will take place over a period of one or two days. The method of collecting data for the study will include reading the school's handbook or other pertinent literature, visiting the school and observing the daily operations of the school (not individual classes), conducting tape-recorded semi-structured interviews with the principal and another staff member, and speaking informally to other staff members. The interviews will be conducted with the principal, and another staff member chosen by the principal who has been directly involved with middle school innovations in the school. After the data is collected, the interviews will be transcribed and together with the other field notes analyzed to produce descriptions of each school.

To ensure that the descriptions of the school are trustworthy, they will sent to the schools for review before they are included in the final thesis document. At this time, the schools will have an opportunity to correct or delete portions of the descriptions if desired.

In addition, specific procedures for ensuring that the University of Alberta's ethical guidelines for research will be followed. Schools participating in the study or individuals who are participating either through interviews or informal discussion have the right to opt out of the study before the school visits or interviews are conducted. The participants' real names will not be used in the final thesis document to ensure anonymity. Field notes,

transcripts and tapes will only be accessible to the researcher during the study and will then be destroyed after the thesis has been completed and successfully defended.
As mentioned, I hope to be able to engage in informal discussion with staff members such as yourself at the school when the opportunity arises. Since data obtained in this naturalistic setting is rich in nature, I would like to use this data for my study. As a result, I must obtain your consent to participate in my study in this manner. I realize that your days at (school name) are busy and therefore will attempt to be as unintrusive as possible. However, the description or your school would be greatly enriched by contributions from as many sources as possible, and I hope that you will be interested in sharing any comments or observations you have about (school name).

Please feel free to contact me before my visit to the school if you have any further questions or concerns about the study. My home phone number is 484-6302 and my e-mail address is jlj3@gpu.srv.ualberta.ca.

I look forward to visiting your school and exploring its unique interpretation of the middle school concept!

Sincerely,

Jane L. Johnston

I give my consent to participate in this study on middle schools in Alberta through informal discussion about (school name) as a "middle school" with the researcher. I realize that my comments will become part of the researcher's field notes and could be included in the final thesis document.

_____ _____

Signature Date

APPENDIX B

Proposed Interview Schedule

Note: These questions are intended to serve only as a guide for the interview and to ensure comprehensiveness is achieved. It is expected that responses will also cover other questions, in which case I will omit these questions.

1. What was the initial rationale for choosing the middle school concept for this school?

2. What do you believe is special or different about a middle school from an elementary school and especially, a junior high school? How is this reflected in your philosophy or mission statement?

3. How does your mission statement/goals for the school translate into programs and practices? How was this developed? What is it based on (literature, etc.)?

3. How do you handled scheduling and timetabling in your schools and how is this unique to a middle school?

4. How do you group children into their particular classes?

5. Do you have organizational arrangements that encourage long-term teacher-student relationships? If so, can you describe them.

6. How do your programs meet individual learning needs, for example students with special needs?

7. How does classroom instruction reflect the learning styles of the developing adolescent?

8. How does your student evaluation and reporting reflect your middle school philosophy or mission statement?

9. Do you have an advisory program (home-based guidance program)? If so, can you describe it. How does your advisory program affect the role of the guidance counsellor in your school?

10. Do you utilize interdisciplinary team structures in your school? If so, what are they?

11. How do your extra-curricular programs reflect your middle school philosophy?

12. Does your school promote the idea of continuous progress for students? How?

13. What exploratory programs do you offer for the students at your school?

14. Do you have any middle level education staff development and/or school improvement structures in place? If so, could you describe them?

15. Does your school use a collaborative decision-making model? If so, what does it look like?

16. How did your teachers and administrators' experience and/or education contribute to their selection as middle school educators?

17. What characteristics are essential for an exemplary/effective middle school teacher?

18. What other characteristics are essential for a middle school that haven't been mentioned?

19. What have been the major challenges for your staff or students in developing middle school principles and practices?

20. What do you see the successes or advantages your school has had as a middle school?

21. What aspects of your middle school do you feel are in need of change or improvement? What aspects are being improved upon presently?

22. What are your goals for continued improvement of middle school practices in your school?

23. How do you achieve a positive school climate, (classroom practices, teacher attitudes/responses to students, school programs)?

24. How do you engage parents in their children's education in your school?*

25. How do you connect students to the community?